

# How We Stop It

intouchwithhumanity

## How We Stop It by intouchwithhumanity

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**Genre:** Alpha Bill Denbrough, Alternate Universe - Canon Divergence, Angst, Ben Hanscom Loves Beverly Marsh, Ben Hanscom is a Good Friend, Beverly Marsh Knows Everything, Beverly Marsh Loves Ben Hanscom, Bill Denbrough Loves Stanley Uris, Bill Denbrough is a Good Friend, Bisexual Richie Tozier, Bisexual Stanley Uris, Boys In Love, Cheating, Deadlights (IT), Eddie Kaspbrak Loves Richie Tozier, Eddie Kaspbrak is a Mess, F/M, Fix-It, Fluff, Friendship/Love, Future, Gay Eddie Kaspbrak, Hallucinations, Implied/Referenced Abuse, Implied/Referenced Character Death, Implied/Referenced Suicide, Lots of Reddie, Love Confessions, M/M, Mike Hanlon is a Good Friend, Mutual Pining, Old Friends, Pansexual Bill Denbrough, Pennywise (IT) Being an Asshole, Pining, Reddie, References to Suicide, Richie Tozier Loves Eddie Kaspbrak, Richie Tozier is a Mess, Soft Eddie Kaspbrak, Soft Richie Tozier, Sorry Not Sorry, Stanley Uris Loves Bill Denbrough, Stanlon - Freeform, Stenbrough, Time Loop, because i love them, benverly - Freeform, i had this idea and now im obsessed with it help, let them be happy, not my fault theyre all gay, stenbrough is real im digging it, this should be chapter 3 im just saying

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**Characters:** Audra Phillips, Ben Hanscom, Beverly Marsh, Bill Denbrough, Eddie Kaspbrak, Mike Hanlon, Original Female Character(s), Original Male Character(s), Patricia Blum Uris, Richie Tozier, Stanley Uris, The Losers Club (IT), Tom Rogan

**Relationships:** Ben Hanscom/Beverly Marsh, Beverly Marsh/Tom Rogan, Bill Denbrough/Audra Phillips, Bill Denbrough/Beverly Marsh, Bill Denbrough/St Stanley Uris, Eddie Kaspbrak & Richie Tozier, Eddie Kaspbrak/Richie Tozier, Patricia Blum Uris/St Stanley Uris

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**Summary:**

‘Guys, are you seeing this?’

‘Seeing what?’

‘Them.’

‘Who are they?’

‘Th-they’re us.’

Or: The one where the young Losers see a vision of their older selves after the final fight with IT, and realise that Eddie and Stan are both dead. Hell-bent on saving their friends' lives, they try and figure out how to change the future.

## 1. They're Us

The Losers walked steadily along the kissing bridge. It had been a few days since they'd sent It back into hibernation, blood oaths still raw on their hands. The cast still encased Eddie's arm, the bandages still looped around Stan's head.

Bill and Bev were holding hands, much to Ben's quiet chagrin. Mike and Stan were deep in conversation, poring over Stan's guide to birds. Richie was characteristically making fun of Eddie for something or other, but they were both laughing.

Suddenly, Beverly stopped in her tracks, squeezing tighter on Bill's hand, staring dead ahead.

Bill immediately turned to her, 'B-Bev? You o-okay?'

The rest of the Losers held back to look at her, hearing the concern peppering Bill's voice.

'Guys, are you seeing this?' Bev whispered, clearly frightened.

Stan's blood ran cold. 'Seeing what?'

'Them,' Bev said, raising her other hand as though to wave.

Hesitant, fear trickling through them, the Losers slowly turned to see what Bev was talking about.

Across from them stood five adults. In the centre stood a beautiful woman with short red hair. On the left, a dark-haired man in a checked shirt and a tall, broad, black man. On the right, a handsome, bearded man and finally, a man with stubble and glasses, wearing a Hawaiian shirt.

All of them looked harrowed. All of them were dirty. All of them were covered in blood, but the man in the Hawaiian shirt seemed to have it the worst.

'Who are they?' Ben swallowed.

The red-haired woman raised her hand, mimicking Bev. Across her palm, clear as crystal, there was a long, pink scar.

Bill exhaled, 'Th-they're us.'

'Bill?' Stan said weakly.

'Yeah?'

'I don't see anything,' he said.

'I don't s-see you either,' Bill agreed.

'No,' Stan gripped Bill's upper arm. 'Bill, I don't see *anything*.' His eyes were wide, as he stared at the rest of his friends, who all seemed agog. Across from him, he saw nothing out of the ordinary, only the road, the bridge, the fence, the trees.

'Richie?' Eddie tugged at the bottom of Richie's floral shirt. He scanned across the line-up, breathing erratically. 'Where am I?'

Richie had been wondering the same thing. Before he knew how to react, his older self was pelting towards them, hollering, only they could hear no sound. Older Mike held him back, and Richie's heart pounded as he saw the tears streaming down his older self's face as he collapsed to the floor, gripping onto Mike's arm, hands balling into fists.

Bill walked a couple of steps forwards and asked his older self, 'Where's Stan?'

The older Bill fell to his knees, reaching out for his younger self, but they were separated, unable to touch, as though a wall of glass lay between them.

Richie ran towards himself. 'Hey, asshole!' Richie shouted at the spectre. 'Where's Eddie? Where the fuck is Eddie?'

The older Richie looked up when he realised that his younger self was standing over him, unable to touch him, unable to hear him, but clearly desperate, confused and angry. He looked down at the blood on his shirt, opened his trembling palms and hated seeing the blood

on his hands: all he had left.

Richie stared at his older self, the tears pricking in his eyes, disbelieving, not accepting the version of events that were quickly formulating in his head. 'What happened? Start fucking talking. Start fucking *talking!*' he screamed into the ether.

Bill pointed at Stan. He asked his older self again, 'Where is h-he?'

Older Bill's gaze slipped to Stan. He blinked twice, then his face crumpled. He didn't say a word, only shook his head. His mouth moved, but Bill couldn't hear him. He watched his lips carefully, but all he could make out was the name Stan being said over and over again.

Ben looked at the man who was supposed to be himself, but he didn't believe what he saw was real. The man was too tall, too handsome, in too-good shape. It didn't make sense. Ben was never going to look like that.

The older Ben guessed what his younger self was thinking. Slowly, he nodded, then mouthed, 'January embers.'

Ben gasped. Then he scanned down the rest of the adults and saw that the older Bill and Bev were both wearing wedding rings, but his older self wasn't wearing one.

Eddie came up behind Richie, his stomach churning as he looked at his own blood splattered over Richie's older self. 'Richie?' he whispered again, the terror so plainly displayed on his face, knitting his eyebrows together.

Bev stared at the exchange between Bill and his older self. Older Bev waved for her attention and got it. The woman pointed at Stan, then at Bev, and said, 'You know what happened,' only her words didn't carry.

Bev read them on her lips, knowing what she was saying, because she had seen. Tears slipped from her eyes, and she felt as though she were caught in It's Deadlights once more, catatonic.

Richie cried out again, 'Where the fuck is Eddie?' but by now he

knew. Eddie did too, grabbing for Richie's flailing, furious hands as they yelled.

Stan couldn't see what was happening, but he could see how depressed and wild everyone else was getting, which was just as bad, if not worse. He could see Bill hyperventilating as he repeatedly asked where Stan was. That couldn't be a good sign.

Seeing how distressed the older Richie was getting, burying his head in one hand, holding his blood-spattered glasses in the other, the older Mike waved for Richie and Eddie's attention. He unwittingly grabbed his own younger self's instead. He mouthed, 'We stopped It. We won.'

'We did?' Mike asked. 'How? How do we stop It?'

Bill grabbed Stan's hand, not tearing his eyes away from his older self for a moment. He echoed Mike's question, but it wasn't about It's death. 'How do we s-s-stop it?'

Richie dropped to the ground, mirroring his future self, completely distraught, and asked the same question. 'How do we stop it?'

Bev fainted, and the vision vanished.

'Bev? Bev!' Ben yelled, checking that she hadn't hit her head as she fell. 'We need to get her out of the road,' he said. Mike hastily rushed to his aid. They lifted her limp body and staggered over to the grass.

Bill still stood clutching Stan's hand, staring at where the apparition had been.

Stan whispered, 'Bill? Bill, what did you see?' but Bill couldn't tell him just yet. Instead, he tugged at his hand to lead Stan over to the kerbside where Mike and Ben were carrying Bev.

As soon as his older self disappeared, Richie lunged into the vacuum, as though he could drag him back from the void, but he couldn't. His palms scraped over the ground and he screamed, 'No, you fucker! Come back, you fucking coward!'

'Richie,' Eddie blubbered beside him, dropping to his knees and

throwing his arms around Richie's shoulders. He knew he didn't really need his inhaler, but in that moment, he would have given anything to have it.

Richie reached up and balled his fists around Eddie's shirt, burying his face into Eddie's neck as he cried. Then he released his grip and grappled to fling his arms properly around Eddie's shoulders, pressing the flat of his hands on Eddie's back, so that his hands jerked and his fingers spread as Eddie wept and snatched breaths. Although it hurt to feel that Eddie was so upset, he needed to feel the warmth of his skin, the movement in his muscles, to know he was alive.

'Get out of the road, you two,' Mike called back to them. 'Come on, we need to stay together.'

Stan was still staring hopelessly at Bill, waiting for him to find the words to explain. He squeezed at Bill's hand. 'Tell me. Tell me what you saw.'

Bill shook his head, struggling. 'It w-w-was us. O-only, we were o-older. A lot o-o-older.'

Ben was bent over Bev, trying to get her to respond. 'Eddie!' he cried over his shoulders. Eddie would know what to do.

Eddie and Richie hadn't moved, but at the shout of his name, Eddie pulled away enough to look in Richie's eyes. 'We should move,' he managed, sniffing, wiping his hand under his nose.

Richie looked at him and nodded, making a strange, choking sound. He shook as he struggled to his feet and they led each other, holding each other up, as they walked over to the rest of the group.

'Eddie?' Ben reached for him. 'What do we do?'

Eddie blinked, unable to think beyond what he had just witnessed. He looked at Bev and tried to bring himself back into the present. When he spoke, it was hardly more than a whisper. 'On her back. Lift her legs. Is she breathing?'

Mike checked, then nodded, 'Yeah.'

Eddie sighed, 'She'll be fine.'

'But, how are you?' Mike asked tentatively.

Starting to panic again, Eddie clutched at his stomach and spluttered, 'Dead, apparently.'

Richie lurched to the side and vomited. 'Sorry,' he muttered, wiping his mouth on the back of his hand.

'Dead?' Ben asked quietly.

Lowering himself to the ground, Eddie nodded, his eyes wide and fearful.

Stan lost his temper, 'Will someone please tell me what the fuck just happened? I didn't see shit! I just saw you lot losing your fucking minds and then Bev fainted and now you're all vomiting and saying you're dead!'

The Losers stared at him. Slowly, Bev started to come to.

'We stop It,' Mike explained, not just for Stan, but for those who hadn't seen his side of the conversation. 'We come back to Derry and we stop It. That was us after the final fight with It.'

'That wasn't real,' Richie spat. 'There is no fucking way that was real. That's It fucking with us, right? Just like It has all summer.'

Bev fully regained consciousness, clinging on to Ben's hand as he hauled her up. 'What happened?' she murmured.

Bill finally found his voice, explaining for Stan's benefit. 'It w-was us. But it w-w-wasn't all of us. Y-you and Eddie w-were m-m-missing.'

'And everyone else was covered in blood,' Eddie added, his eyes glazed over as the image burned into his memories.

'Stop,' Richie shouted. 'Stop. It wasn't real. It's just trying to hurt us.'

Mike furrowed his brow. 'But why would It let us know that we won? Why wouldn't It show more of us gone?'

‘And why couldn’t I see it at all?’ Stan asked, his voice rising to a higher pitch. ‘Why could Eddie see and I couldn’t, if we were both missing?’

Bev sighed, ‘Because you don’t come back to Derry.’

‘What?’ Ben asked.

Bev closed her eyes. ‘Stan didn’t come back. Eddie did. At least, for them, whatever we saw, that’s what happened.’

‘So, I’m alive?’ Stan raised an eyebrow hopefully.

Catching his gaze, Bev’s eyelids flickered.

‘Oh,’ Stan whispered, sitting down with a jolting thud.

‘How d-do you know that?’ Bill looked confused.

Sniffing, Bev said, ‘Because I’ve seen it. The woman, me, she told me that I knew what happened to Stan. Which means it’s what I’ve seen.’

‘When?’ Mike asked.

‘In the Deadlights,’ Bev murmured.

‘So, what does happen to me?’ Stan asked flatly.

Bev shook her head, ‘I don’t want to,’ she trailed off, grimacing as she thought about the bathtub, about the writing on the wall, the serene expression on Stan’s lifeless face, the slits from elbow to wrist, crossed at the bracelets of fortune.

Stan buried his face in his knees, ‘Oh, God.’

‘Do you know what happens to me?’ Eddie asked tentatively, unsure if he wanted the answer.

Bev shook her head. ‘No. I only saw what happens to us all if we don’t fight It.’

‘Us all?’ Ben asked.

She didn't look at them. 'If we don't fight, we all die.'

'Bullshit,' Richie stated firmly. 'Stop it, all of you. It's bullshit. It's a fucking hallucination and it doesn't mean shit, alright?'

'Richie,' Bill looked at him, a knowing look in his eyes. 'W-what if it w-wasn't?'

Richie shook his head and denied, 'You're all fucking crazy. I'm not listening to this.' Then he started to saunter away.

'Richie!' the group hollered after him in discordant chorus.

Eddie started to watch him go, then got to his feet, apologising to the rest of the Losers as he chased after Richie. 'Richie, wait up.'

The rest of the group watched them disappear.

'Richie's right, though. Isn't he?' Ben squeaked. 'It's not real.'

Bill gulped. 'I d-don't know.'

Mindlessly, Bev rubbed at her temples and groaned. 'It's so fucking bright,' she muttered.

'I sh-should take you home,' Bill offered, then glanced at Stan. He still had his face hidden, arms wrapped around his legs. He shot a pleading look at Mike.

Mike nodded and went over to where Stan sat. He rested a hand on his shoulder. 'Hey, man. You want to go for a walk?'

Stan shook his head. 'I want to go home.'

Extending a hand so that he could haul Stan to his feet, he suggested, 'Then let's walk there.'

As Bill helped Bev to her feet, she staggered. He clutched for her, 'Whoa! Ben, c-can you g-give me a hand?'

Like lightning, Ben was at Beverly's side, propping her up against himself. 'Sure.' He'd do anything for Beverly. He'd do anything for

Bill, even though he was jealous of him.

They disbanded.

## 2. Appointment in Samarra

### Summary for the Chapter:

Harrowed by the vision, the Losers disperse; Richie and Eddie, Mike and Stan, and Bill, Bev and Ben to comfort each other and speculate about what they've seen.

'Richie, wait up,' Eddie called.

Richie didn't turn around, but he slowed enough that Eddie could clasp a hand onto his shoulder and start to walk with him. 'Hey, Eds.'

'Don't call me Eds,' Eddie said softly.

Richie looked at him. He hated that Eddie was trying to comfort him when arguably, Eddie had experienced something far more traumatic. Feeling guilty, he jostled Eddie's shoulder. 'Are you okay?' he asked.

'No,' Eddie sighed. 'You?'

'No.'

They stepped in silence for a moment, then Eddie murmured, 'I've never seen you cry like that.'

'Yeah, well, I'd really let myself go,' Richie said. 'Hurt to see.'

'Richie,' Eddie whispered.

'It's over now,' Richie stressed. 'So we should just try and forget it, because it wasn't real.'

Eddie grimaced, 'We still saw it. Whether it was real or not, we've seen it.'

Swallowing, Richie begged, 'I don't want to talk about it, Eds. Really. I'm surprised you do. That was,' he shuddered, 'fucking horrendous.'

'Understatement,' Eddie agreed. 'It just freaked me out. Seeing you

like that, I mean. Both versions of you.'

Richie's face contorted, 'You think I wouldn't cry if you -' he stopped, unable to finish, then threw his arms around Eddie, needing to hold him again.

Eddie let his chin rest on Richie's shoulder. His arms snaked around Richie's waist. 'I just,' he started, 'wondered why you were only crying out for me? I mean, Stan was missing too.'

Richie shook him off, remembering again. 'It wasn't Stan's blood,' he said matter-of-factly.

Fingers fumbling for a fanny-pack he no longer wore, Eddie tried to regulate his breathing, as he thought about just how much blood had been caked over the older Losers.

Lost in the memory, Richie dug his nails into the palms of his hands. 'They were all bloody, but I,' he inhaled sharply, 'I was completely covered in it. It was still shining wet. And it was so dark in places that it was almost black.'

'Richie,' Eddie snivelled. 'I don't want to die, Richie.'

Richie snapped out of his reverie and clamped his hands on Eddie's shoulders. 'You don't. You won't. I wouldn't let it happen.'

'It already has,' Eddie wailed. 'We saw it. I'm dead. I don't make it.'

'Listen to me,' Richie commanded, shaking him, 'It wasn't fucking real. I can prove it. Okay, say, say, hypothetically you had,' he strained, 'died.' He breathed raggedly, 'The question would still stand: where were you? Surely, we would have had,' he screwed up his face, struggling to say the words, 'a body, or something? Otherwise, fuck, you'd -'

'Still be down there,' Eddie finished, horror in his eyes. 'Oh fuck, I don't want to die in that fucking house. I don't want to be down there forever.'

Richie locked his gaze. 'That's how I know it's not fucking real. Because I wouldn't have left you. Not a fucking chance. You'd have to

drag me kicking and screaming.'

Fresh tears in his eyes, Eddie managed, 'Maybe they did.' He clawed his hands through his hair, chest rising and falling rapidly. 'Or maybe you couldn't get me out. Maybe there wasn't enough of me to bring back.'

'It's not real,' Richie denied for the umpteenth time.

'I think it is,' Eddie stated plainly, 'and you think it is too.'

'What?' Richie's brow furrowed.

Eddie shrugged his shoulders up. 'You asked them how we stop it. You wouldn't have asked that if you thought it wasn't real.'

Richie's eyes stung. 'Eddie,' he cracked.

Eddie broke down, clutching at Richie again, and Richie held him, his heart breaking. 'I don't want to die,' he said again.

'I won't let it happen,' Richie vowed. 'Okay? If we know this now and if it is real,' he felt his stomach twist as he placed each of his hands on Eddie's cheeks, 'then we can figure out how to stop it. We won't go fucking near that house unless we know how to stop it.'

'I just won't come back,' Eddie said, blotting the tears cascading down his face. 'Then it can't happen like that.'

Richie shook his head, 'No, no. You heard Bev. If we don't come back,' his breath hitched.

'We all die,' Eddie sobbed again. 'Fuck, there's no way out. Either way I'm dead.' He spat, 'Fucking ironic. Spend my whole life thinking I'm sick and in the end that fucking clown is gonna get me.'

'It's not!' Richie insisted. 'It's not.' He wiped his own eyes. 'Fucking hell. Fuck this fucking clown bullshit motherfucker. Let's,' he sighed. 'Let's just go home.'

Eddie shuffled, 'Can I come to yours? I don't really want to be alone.'

‘Well, yeah!’ Richie put his arm around Eddie’s shoulders and started to walk. ‘That’s what I meant.’

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‘You really didn’t see anything?’ Mike asked Stan as they walked.

Stan shook his head. ‘Nothing. Just you six. What did you see?’

‘I saw older Bill and Bev just,’ he swallowed, ‘unable to look at you without crying. I saw Ben talking to his older self, but I don’t know about what.’

‘What about yourself?’ Stan pressed.

Mike smacked his lips together. ‘I didn’t get to talk to him much. He was a bit preoccupied with the older Richie. He was just wrecked.’

‘Because Eddie was dead,’ Stan said. It wasn’t a question.

‘It was really hard to watch,’ Mike admitted. ‘They were all sad, but he was something else.’

Stan stared out over the horizon. ‘Richie acts like he’s above it all, but he cares a lot. Especially about Eddie.’

‘He cares about you too,’ Mike added carefully. ‘We all do.’

Thinking back to what he saw, Stan snorted, ‘Bill does, at least.’

Mike’s heart buckled. ‘Hey. We all do. I do.’

Hearing the hurt in his voice, Stan felt guilty. ‘Thanks.’

They stepped in silence until Mike finally had the courage to ask, ‘What do you think happens?’

‘To me?’ Stan’s heart thudded. ‘I don’t know. How could I know? It could be anything. Maybe I get hit by a bus. Maybe I get sick.’ His

face contorted, brutally, grotesquely.

‘Bev’s seen it,’ Mike said quietly. ‘She knows what happens. Would you,’ he gulped, ‘ask?’

Stan felt his bones stiffening. ‘It’s one thing to know you’re going to die. It’s another thing to know how. To know when. Could you live with knowing that?’ He felt nauseous. ‘You saw her face. She can barely live with it herself.’

Mike raised his eyebrows. ‘If we know, then maybe we can stop it.’

‘We do stop It,’ Stan reminded.

‘That’s not what I meant,’ Mike sighed.

Stan furrowed his brow. ‘That never normally works. In the stories, I mean. What’s the old proverb? Man meets his destiny on the path he takes to avoid it. The Appointment in Samarra.’

‘Stan, don’t resign yourself to something like that,’ Mike warned, a flicker of concern in his eyes. ‘We’ve got to at least try, don’t we?’

Standing still, now outside his front door, Stan sighed. ‘Thanks for walking me home.’ Then he went inside.

Mike watched as he closed the door on him. ‘Well, I’m gonna try,’ he said resolutely.

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Ben and Bill laid Bev awkwardly onto the sofa. She shifted to get comfortable, her head resting on the arm, propped up with cushions.

‘Thanks, guys,’ she said. ‘I feel better already.’

‘I’ll get you some water,’ Ben said. ‘Do you want some too, Bill?’

Bill nodded. ‘P-please. Thanks.’

Ben vanished.

‘Are you okay?’ Bev asked Bill, raising a hand to his cheek.

Bill knelt so that his face was only a few inches from hers. ‘What happens t-to Stan?’ he asked quickly.

Bev’s eyes glimmered, reliving. ‘Bill, you don’t want to know.’

‘I d-do. I h-h-have to know,’ he pleaded.

Bev shook her head and whimpered, ‘No.’

‘Tell m-me.’

‘Once you know, you can’t choose to forget it. I can’t burden you with it,’ she snivelled.

‘Bev, p-please.’

‘No!’ she yelled, guttural chokes ebbing from her throat.

Bill clasped her shoulder, leaning over her, ‘Please!’

Tears oozed from her eyes like translucent balloons as she sobbed, ‘He kills himself.’

His heart stopped, plummeting. ‘What?’ he asked, but he didn’t expect an answer. He closed his eyes and softened his grip. ‘H-how?’ he asked quietly.

‘What?’ Bev spluttered. ‘No, no.’

‘How?’ Bill demanded.

She crumbled underneath him, curling in on herself. ‘He slits his wrists. In the bathtub.’

Weak, Bill’s knees buckled. He screwed up his nose, screwed up his eyes, his mouth wavered. ‘Fuck. I’m,’ he stuttered, ‘I-I’m s-sorry, B-B-Bev. I’m s-sorry.’ He threw his arms around her and dragged her into an embrace. ‘I’m s-so s-s-sorry.’

Gradually, her hands slid around his back to hold him, understanding if not forgiving. She hated how Bill had beaten it out of her, hated how much it would hurt him to know what she knew, but she did feel some release from sharing what she had seen.

‘Is everything okay in here?’ Ben’s voice trembled.

‘Yeah,’ Bev said, letting Bill go. She reached out for the water in Ben’s hand and sipped at it. Bill took the other glass and sat himself down on the other end of the sofa.

‘You asked her, didn’t you?’ Ben said quietly. ‘You know.’ When Bill didn’t say anything, he shook his head. ‘Well, don’t tell me. I don’t want to know.’

‘The m-m-more we know, the e-easier it’ll b-be to s-s-stop it,’ Bill said. ‘I j-just wish w-we knew m-m-more about what h-happens to Eddie, s-so we c-c-can try and s-stop that too.’ It couldn’t be worse than what he was imagining.

Ben sat down in the armchair. ‘I don’t know how you can think about it. I wish we hadn’t seen it.’

‘Bev?’ Bill whispered, and she looked at him. ‘D-do you th-think we can s-stop it?’

She thought. ‘Well, the vision I saw, apart from Stan, nothing else happened the same. The rest of us came back and fought It. That’s already two versions.’ She sat up. ‘So, I think,’ her eyes widened. ‘Maybe we can.’

‘How?’ Ben asked, a rhetorical question. None of them had the answers.

At that point, the Denbrough parents walked in, and the conversation was forced to cease.

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Richie and Eddie went up to Richie's bedroom. They sat on Richie's bed, side by side, not touching at first. Soon, Eddie's head dropped onto Richie's shoulder, and Richie wrapped an arm around his neck, pulling him closer.

Eddie let himself curl, knees dropping onto Richie's thighs, cast-clad arm draping over Richie's waist, clutching as he continued to weep. It was quiet now, tears falling in a steady stream with delicate precision down the tracks carved through his cheeks, the only sound the occasional snuffle.

Richie wasn't crying anymore, but he was scarred, terrified. He gently placed his hand on Eddie's casted arm and stroked his thumb absentmindedly against the plaster, swiping back and forth as though he could flick between the S and the V. Loser. Lover. Loser. Lover.

He tried to think of another time when they'd been holding each other so intimately, but he couldn't. He wished it was under different circumstances.

Eddie felt oddly comforted by Richie, considering the day he'd had. As his head shifted to lay on Richie's chest, he could hear the steady thump of his heartbeat. It wasn't often they were so quiet together.

It made him feel safe, knowing that he was allowed to break down for a moment without Richie teasing him, that Richie knew he needed a little time. He'd never been hugged by Richie like this. He wondered if he ever would be again.

Richie was thinking awful things. He couldn't help himself. Seeing all that blood, Eddie's blood, and how distraught his older self had been, he started to guess a few likelihoods. Predominantly, that he probably saw Eddie die, probably watched it happen, was close enough to his body to be showered in red. Which meant he probably tried to stop it and failed.

'What if it was my fault?' Richie whispered suddenly.

Eddie swallowed, 'What? Richie, no. You can't think like that. You don't know that.'

As far as Richie was concerned, if he and Eddie were in the same room when Eddie died, then that might constitute his fault, because he didn't do enough to protect him. He shook the thought away. That was the kind of thought that drove Eddie's mother to be who she was. He wouldn't do that to Eddie.

'You're right,' Richie said. 'Sorry. I just,' he exhaled, 'can't stop thinking about it.'

'Me neither,' Eddie agreed.

Richie's mind reeled with questions. Had they still been friends as men? Hopefully. Enemies? Unlikely. Strangers? Possibly. Lovers? His heart squeezed. Not a chance.

He wondered what the last thing they said to each other would be. He wondered what things they never said. Sweat gleaned on his forehead, the palms of his hands, the soles of his feet. Did he ever tell Eddie that he loved him?

He'd always assumed he never would. He'd never wanted to; the thought was petrifying. Besides, Eddie would surely hate him for it, the way everyone else in this town seemed to hate boys who loved other boys.

'Richie, are you okay?' Eddie asked, hearing Richie's heart race beneath his ear.

Richie shrugged his way out of Eddie's grasp and climbed out of the bed to open the window. He stuck his neck out into the fresh air, but it felt thick and cloying in his lungs. His vision blurred, even through his coke-bottle glasses, so he took them off, rubbing at his eyes.

Feeling oddly rejected, Eddie's hands found the warm patch on the bed where Richie had been laying. He'd not realised how touch-starved he was until it had been given and taken away. There was nothing he craved more than Richie's arms back around him, protective, even loving.

Eddie got up slowly, walking towards Richie who was still facing away from him, spine hunched as he leaned over the window sill.

‘Richie? Talk to me.’

He couldn’t say it. He knew he couldn’t say it. But he could say something. He whirled around and blurted, ‘You know how much you mean to me, right?’

Taken aback, Eddie studied Richie’s expression with tender, concerned curiosity. ‘What?’ he asked quietly.

Richie’s lower lip quivered. ‘I know I’m a dick. I know I’m a fucking Trashmouth and I’m always saying shit like I fucked your mom or insulting you and –’

Eddie cut him off, ‘I know you don’t mean it, Richie.’ He smiled, ‘But you’re kinda taking the fun out of it.’

He relaxed his shoulders, looking at Eddie with more hopeless adoration than he intended, but he didn’t have the energy to hide it. ‘Sorry,’ he said. ‘I just needed to check.’

Eddie shrugged, ‘That’s just what we do. I know that.’ He knew it, but it was damn good to hear. Moments of candour from Richie were few and far between, and when one was a nugget of kindness directed at Eddie, he just about felt like the most special person in the world.

‘Okay,’ Richie nodded. ‘Good.’

Shuffling, Eddie was unsure if he should say what was scorching on his tongue, but if he didn’t say it now, he didn’t know when he would get the opportunity. ‘You mean a lot to me too,’ he said quickly. ‘Just so we’re, you know, clear.’

Richie smiled at him, and by God, Eddie felt that he could melt. It was the softest look he’d ever seen on Richie’s face, with his cheeks full and the corner of his mouth pulled upwards as though suspended by his eyebrow. And his eyes, his blue eyes, glimmering with melancholic love.

‘Don’t worry, Eds,’ Richie jested, trying to regain his composure, ‘I know you love me.’

Eddie rolled his eyes and the boys made their way back to the bed,

sitting across from one another as Richie leaned to peruse his record collection, something for them to listen to together, to forget the day.

Eddie watched him as he scanned through the vinyl, crouched. As he blinked, he felt like he saw Richie's older self in that same crouched position, in shreds. He couldn't let that reality be. The reality where Richie was alone, and he was gone forever.

He wondered which he'd rather be, pondering the situation in reverse, if it had been himself stood there drenched in Richie's blood, and Richie nowhere to be seen. He didn't know. The fact of the matter was, it was him that was dead.

It was such a bizarre, alien thought. Of course, everyone died, and he was more acutely aware of it than some of the other Losers, thanks to his father's death and his mother's persistent reminders of the dangers at every turn. Only Bill might know even better, having lost Georgie.

It was different, knowing the details, knowing almost exactly how long he had left.

He wondered if Richie was there at the end, whether he'd know what he wanted to say to him, if he'd have the time to form the sentences. He put his chin in his hands. He didn't even know how he felt about Richie now.

Sure, they were friends, good friends, even best friends, but there was something else, something other which twitched in him angrily, confusing but refusing to be ignored. He didn't know what it was, but he knew that Richie was important in a way that he couldn't yet explain.

'Bowie?' Richie suggested, holding up the album.

Eddie smiled, 'Sure.'

Richie put it on and kicked back, laying diagonally across the bed, head on the pillow, eyes closed. Without much thought, Eddie lay his head on Richie's stomach, staring up at the ceiling. It took until the third song for Richie's hand to wind up in his hair, and when it did,

Eddie finally let his eyelids flutter shut.

I know you love me. That's what Richie had said. For the first time, Eddie thought that maybe he did.

**Notes for the Chapter:**

Chapter 3 coming 1/11 : )

### 3. What It Wants

#### Summary for the Chapter:

The Losers start to regroup and think of a plan, but that means asking some hard questions, and hearing worse answers.

Mike knocked on Bill's front door. It took a second before Ben opened it.

'Hey, Mike,' he greeted. 'Come in.'

'Is Bev still here?' Mike asked, poking his head around.

Ben shook his head. 'No, Bill's parents have just taken her home.'

'Shit,' he muttered.

Disbelieving, Ben accused, 'You want to know too, don't you? Leave her alone. She's been through it enough.'

Mildly shocked, Mike apologised and sat himself down. 'Where's Bill?'

'Kitchen.' Ben said. 'Putting on a pizza for us. Want to stay?'

Mike nodded. 'Thanks.' He shifted awkwardly, but couldn't help asking, 'Do you know then?'

Ben sighed, exasperated, 'No! It's sick. I don't,' he scoffed, then revealed, 'Bill asked her. He knows, okay?'

Bill returned, his head snapping as he saw Mike, 'Hey, man. W-what are you d-d-doing here? Is S-Stan okay?'

'Not really,' Mike said honestly. 'Would you be?'

Shaking his head, Bill sat down. 'I c-can't even imagine. S-Stan. Eddie.'

Ben bit his lip. 'I don't know which of them had it worse. To not see them at all, or to see all of them without you.'

Bill shuddered, 'Don't.'

Mike leaned forwards, 'We have to find out a way to fix it.'

Nodding, Bill said, 'We th-think it's p-p-possible. Bev thinks s-so too.'

His eyes lighting up, Ben said, 'She said that we've been shown two realities. One where we all die. One where Stan and Eddie die. Maybe,' he chewed his cheek, 'maybe if we figured out the difference between those two versions, we'd figure out what sort of thing changes the outcome.'

Mike stared at him, 'That's genius, Ben.'

Bill rubbed his temple. 'In m-m-movies, it's not always s-something that b-big. It c-c-could be s-something s-small. B-butterfly effect.'

Wrinkling his nose, Ben said, 'It's got to be big enough to change most of us. A decision like what cereal you have tomorrow isn't going to be the difference.'

'Right,' Mike nodded. 'We've got to change our courses completely, not take a different route to the same end.'

'B-but we d-d-don't know where w-we end up,' Bill said. 'One way we're dead, one way we beat It. We c-can't p-p-possibly know what m-makes that h-happen.'

Ben closed his eyes. 'We know where one of us ends up. One didn't change.'

'S-Stan.'

'If we figure out how to save Stan,' Ben breathed, 'then everything will be different.'

Mike settled and resettled in his chair, excited and scared. 'Okay, okay, this is good. How,' he puffed his cheeks, 'How do we save Stan? How,' he exhaled heavily, 'how does he die?'

Bill glanced at Ben, who had made it clear that he didn't want to know up to this point. However, seeing now the value of the information, he reluctantly nodded at Bill, giving him the okay to divulge the answer.

That didn't make it easy for Bill to say. 'H-h-he,' he started, then stopped, his stutter getting the better of him. 'H-he d-does it to h-h-h-himself.'

Slowly, Mike sat back, sinking into the cushions of the armchair, wishing he could retreat through it and disappear. Ben brought his hands to his ears, as though he could retrospectively block himself from hearing the words.

'Good God,' Mike breathed. 'Why would he do that?'

Bill shook his head, 'I-I d-don't know.'

'When?' Mike asked.

'I d-d-didn't ask.'

Mike swallowed, 'We should probably find out.'

'Not today,' Ben insisted. 'We need to give Bev a break.'

'B-but she's leaving D-Derry s-soon,' Bill said sadly. 'We c-can't wait t-too long.'

Mike patted his knees. 'We should get everyone together. Talk this stuff through. Come up with some sort of plan.'

Downstairs, the kitchen timer dinged.

'I think that's our pizza,' Ben said.

---

The Losers gathered at the clubhouse. Bill had called each of their

houses to rally the troops. Stan hadn't come to the phone, so he'd left a message with his mother, telling her that it was important Stan come.

Mike dropped into the underground hideout, dust spitting out from beneath his shoes. Richie and Eddie were sat on either end of the hammock, Richie's hand wrapped around Eddie's ankle to steady them. Bill was holding Bev's hand, whispering apologies into her ear for the day before. Ben was pacing back and forth, thinking. He hadn't been able to stop thinking.

'Where's Stan?' Mike asked immediately, a note of panic in his voice.

'I'm here,' came the voice above him, and then Stan dropped beside him. He half-heartedly patted Mike's back, then reached for a shower cap, snapping the elastic down over his head.

'So, what's this all about, Billiam?' Richie asked.

'Okay,' Bill began. 'I n-need everyone to p-promise that they're g-g-going to s-stay c-calm and in the c-clubhouse.' He waited for a muted accord. 'Mike and B-Ben and I have b-been talking and we wanted to b-bring you all into th-the loop.'

'This is about what we saw, isn't it?' Eddie froze.

'What most of us saw,' Stan corrected.

'If,' Bill stressed heavily, 'what we s-saw was real, then I th-think we all th-think the same th-thing.' He stood in the centre of the group. 'N-not good enough. We w-want to c-come back and defeat It, y-yes,' he looked at Stan, 'but we w-want to d-do it all t-t-together.' He looked at Eddie, 'And we want to c-come out of it all t-t-together too.'

Mike joined Bill's side. 'We think we need to set a new course.' He glanced at Stan. 'We need to do things differently.'

'But we only saw a tiny fraction of this new future,' Bev said, hating to be pessimistic, but realistic. 'How do we find out what things need to change? How do we know what we *can* theoretically change?'

'Well, there's one big thing we know that was consistent between

both realities.' Ben said, flicking his eyes at Stan, who went pale. 'But there might be other consistencies too. If we change them, we might have a shot.'

Richie leaned forwards, engaged. 'Right, I'm with you.'

Eddie added, 'But most of us have only seen one reality play out.' He glanced at Bev. 'Are you, you know, able to remember enough about,' he swallowed, 'the other one?'

'Depends what you mean by that,' Bev said honestly. 'I don't know what sort of thing you might need me to know.'

Richie shuffled, 'Am I better looking in your one?'

Eddie slapped him. 'Richie!'

'It's a genuine question!' Richie complained. 'If I look different, maybe I've done something differently in that life.'

'He has a point,' Ben murmured, thinking about how fit and athletic his future self had been. 'I mean, did we all look the same?'

Bev thought, then nodded, 'I think so.'

'So, I shave my head and we're saved?' Richie suggested limply.

'I thought you wanted to be *better* looking,' Eddie jibed, feeling more like himself than he had done since seeing the vision. The conversation around him was giving him some hope. It made him feel loved, to know that they were conjuring up possible solutions, that they were trying to save him.

'There's got to be more,' Mike insisted.

Ben's head shot up. He blurted, 'The rings.'

'W-what?' Bill asked.

Ben turned to him, 'You were married. You had on a wedding ring. Bev,' he strained, 'Bev did too. But I didn't, and nor did Mike or Richie.'

'I guess Eddie's mom turns down my proposal,' Richie shrugged.

'Beep beep, Richie,' Bev said, her eyes widening. 'I think he's onto something. I think,' she wracked her brains, 'I think that's the same.'

Bill's brow furrowed. 'You c-can really remember that k-k-kind of detail?' If she did, then Bill did not envy her for a second.

'Well, I remember wearing a wedding ring in mine, because it was me, you know.' Bev stammered, remembering vividly, traumatically. 'And you,' her brain fuzzed, 'I don't remember a ring, but there was a photograph. A wedding photograph.'

'What about the rest of us?' Mike asked.

She looked at Mike and Richie. 'I don't remember whether you did or not, I'm sorry. Ben,' she felt a stab of sadness, 'I think you're right that you didn't.'

Mike rubbed his hands together, 'This is good, this is good. We're getting somewhere.'

'Are we?' Stan piped up suddenly.

They all turned to look at him.

Stan fidgeted, 'Have you considered that this is what It wants? Maybe It showed us a future that we could have, a future where It dies but where Eddie and I also die, so that we would get cocky and try and cheat it.' He stared at them. 'You're looking at me like It hasn't done this before, but It has. It uses the people closest to us to hurt us.'

Bill thought about the hallucination of Georgie that had blamed him for his death. Ben thought about the hallucination of Bev, red hair bursting into flames. Richie thought about the hallucination of Eddie, vomiting black tar.

'What if It knows,' Stan struggled, 'that this is the best possible outcome for us? What if our best case scenario is five alive?'

'S-Stan, we're t-trying to s-s-save your life,' Bill reminded. Lips a tight line, knowing what he knew, he whispered, 'Don't you w-want us to?'

‘Yeah, and what about Eddie’s life?’ Richie snapped, suddenly furious.

Stan blinked rapidly, backtracking, ‘Of course I do. Fuck, Eddie, I didn’t mean –’

‘It’s okay,’ Eddie said meekly.

‘Then what did you mean?’ Mike asked, as calmly as he could manage.

Stan sat down, rubbing his hands over his knees. ‘Okay. My point is that we know there is one scenario where I am dead,’ he winced, ‘but most of you live. What if we save my life, but there’s no scenario where I’m alive where as many of you survive? What if we’re just trading one life for another?’

‘Oh,’ Ben hummed. ‘You mean, we could make things better, but we could also make them worse.’

It only took Richie two seconds to refute this. ‘Worse?’ he spat. ‘There is no worse fucking scenario.’ He felt Eddie’s eyes on him but tried to ignore them.

Bill nodded. ‘He’s r-right. Any of us d-d-d-dead: that’s a w-worst c-case scenario, whether it’s one or f-four or fucking all of us.’

‘Unless It lives,’ Bev said solemnly, and Mike nodded his agreement.

Stan nodded, ‘We have to think about the greater good.’

‘We’re not just gonna let you and Eddie die!’ Richie shouted. ‘How are you even fucking arguing this? We know we can beat It with six of us. Fucking Christ, we nearly beat It this summer because we had all seven of us. If there’s a fucking chance we can all make it, then I’m in.’

Eddie finally caught Richie’s eye. There was so much fire in it. Eddie agreed, ‘Obviously, I’m in.’

‘M-me t-too.’

Ben nodded, 'And me.'

Mike clapped his hand on Bill's shoulder. 'Losers stick together.'

Bev smiled up at him, 'Yeah, they do.'

'So, Stan the Man,' Richie challenged, exasperated. 'Will you let us save your fucking neck already?'

Twelve eyes stared at Stan, hopeful and determined. It was his love for them which had forced him to consider his own sacrifice, but it was their love for him which made him say, 'Okay.'

'Okay,' Mike smiled.

'Jesus,' Richie sighed, relieved.

Stan found Eddie's gaze, shooting him an apologetic look, which Eddie nodded his response to. He sighed, 'We need to think about this carefully. Logically.'

Richie groaned, 'Can't we just do something fucking crazy? Something we never would have done before. Wouldn't that change things?' His heart thudded in his chest.

Stan shook his head, 'We don't want to just fuck around with the course of events in case it might change something. That's how we'll screw ourselves over. We need to ensure that whatever changes puts us in a stronger position.'

Bill came and sat beside him, patting his shoulder, 'It's g-good to h-h-have you b-back on b-board, man. Don't know w-what we'd do w-without you.'

'So, what about the wedding rings?' Ben chimed in.

Bev rubbed her ring finger ritualistically. 'Depends on who we marry.'

Periodically darting glances at different members of the group, Bill said, 'Right. If you're h-happily m-m-married, you don't w-want to try and t-take that away. The happier w-we are, the easier It'll be to d-

defeat, right?’

‘Unless having someone we care about gives us more to fear,’ Eddie said darkly, not knowing if his future self was married or not.

‘Depends on what you’re afraid of,’ Mike countered.

Swallowing, Richie looked at Eddie. It didn’t matter whether Eddie was married or not, whether Richie was married or not, because at the end of the day, if Eddie was down in the Neibolt house with It, then Richie had something to be scared of, someone to be scared for.

‘You’re right,’ Stan murmured. ‘It *does* depend on what we’re afraid of.’

It hit Bill at the same time. ‘We thought w-we could w-wait to f-f-face our f-f-fears. M-maybe the p-p-problem is th-that some of us d-don’t until it’s t-t-too late.’

‘What are you saying? That we should go back and wake that fucking clown up?’ Eddie squeaked, clearly not thrilled at the prospect. ‘Veto.’

Ben shook his head, ‘This has nothing to do with Pennywise.’ He wrung his hands.

Throwing his head back into the safety of the hammock, Richie moaned impatiently, wanting the answer to be something simple. ‘For fuck’s sake. We have so many fucking options we’re throwing around here. What do we need to do?’

Trilling her lips, Bev pondered, ‘It’s going to be different for all of us.’

Folding his arms, Mike sighed, ‘We have some serious thinking to do.’

## 4. I Swear

### Summary for the Chapter:

Following their conversation in the clubhouse, Bill goes to visit Bev, but she has secret plans of her own. Richie realises he's been neglecting his friendship with Stan in order to spend time with Eddie.

Bev was leaving Derry in just a couple of days. Meticulously, she packed up her things, neglecting the cigarettes and postcard she kept tucked underneath the grate in her bedroom. There was a knock at her front door, and she went to open it.

‘H-hey.’

Bev wrapped her arms around Bill’s shoulders and hugged him tight. ‘Hey.’

They walked inside as Bill said, ‘I can’t b-believe you’re really g-going.’

‘I know, but I think it’s for the best,’ she admitted, shoving her hands into her back pockets. ‘Fresh start, you know.’

Bill knew what she meant. They were going their separate ways. ‘Fresh s-start.’

‘I’m sorry,’ she said.

He shook his head. ‘Don’t b-be. I m-mean,’ he chuckled, ‘I kinda f-figured that you w-would have s-s-said something if you’d ended up m-marrying m-me.’

Her face hardened. ‘Yeah. I would have.’

‘W-what is it?’ Bill said, seeing the new tension in her arms, the locking of her knees.

Swallowing, she whispered, ‘I don’t know why I marry him.’ Remembering, she closed her eyes, ‘I know what I’ve seen. The Bev

we saw the other day on the road, she'd seen the same, but she was still married. So, I think it's the same guy that I saw in the Deadlights.'

'You m-mean,' Bill recoiled, 'He's there? When you d-d-d-die?'

She broke down, 'He's the reason. We fight and things get,' she gulped, 'out of hand.'

Cold sped down Bill's spine like a globule of ice-water. 'W-what? F-fuck, Bev.' He threw his arms around her again as she cried into his collar, great heaving sobs and sighs.

'If I know that, if I've seen that, how does it still happen?' she asked desperately.

Bill's mind went to Stan and Eddie too. 'I d-don't know,' he trembled.

'I thought, after I came out of the Deadlights, I thought what I'd seen wasn't real,' she said sadly, releasing him. 'Knowing now that it was,' she shook her head, 'I'm so worried for us.'

Hesitant, not wanting to put too much pressure on her, Bill asked, 'C-can you t-t-tell me w-what happens? I m-mean, is th-there anything else w-we should know?'

Bev warned, 'What if it's too much for you to know? I don't want you obsessing.'

'Obsessing?' Bill furrowed his brow. 'I w-won't. I j-just w-want to know if th-there's stuff w-we should look out f-for. Or S-Stan,' he breathed sharply, 'd-do you know w-when that h-happens? H-how long I-I have?'

Bev gripped his cheeks, 'This is exactly what I mean. How long *you* have?' she queried, shaking her head. 'It's not *your* job to save him, Bill.'

He clenched his jaw, 'I j-just c-c-can't b-bear knowing th-that he,' he trailed away.

'Which is why I won't tell you anything more,' Bev confirmed. 'I'm

sorry.'

He was about to challenge this, but seeing the veil clouding in her eyes, he nodded, knowing that he wouldn't change her mind. 'D-do you need any help p-p-packing?' he asked.

She shook her head, smiling, 'No, but I could use some company.'

---

Richie spotted Stan sitting at the lip of the cliff as he cycled. 'Stan!' he called, and Stan jumped, then turned. He waved, so Richie went over. 'What are you doing out here?'

'Birdwatching,' Stan said, but it sounded like a lie. 'You?'

Richie sat down beside him. 'Meeting Eddie in a bit.'

Stan smiled, 'You've hardly let him out of your sight.'

'I have,' Richie refuted, but it was half-hearted. The truth was, he had been spending more time with Eddie since seeing their future selves. Now he knew that the time they had could be limited, he wanted to have every minute that he could. 'Have you talked to him much?'

Shaking his head, Stan admitted, 'Haven't talked to anyone much. Mike and Bill a bit, I suppose, but not really about what happened.'

'He's going through it too,' Richie reminded. 'If anyone would understand, you know.'

'He doesn't need me. He has you,' Stan said, a little bitterly.

'What's that supposed to mean?'

Stan hugged his knees. 'I guess it just hurts. You've been so torn up about Eddie, you've spent so much time with him, and I get it, but,' he shrugged, 'no-one's really done that for me.'

He didn't know that Mike, Ben, Bill and Bev had been trying desperately to help him, knew what happened to him and were fanatical about finding a solution. Knowing the nature of his death, however, had caused them to become distant, thinking it unwise to let Stan in on the details of his own demise, not knowing how to look at him without imagining it.

Feeling like he'd been punched, guilt-ridden and horrified, Richie leapt and threw his arms around Stan with such force that they fell backwards.

'Ow,' Stan complained, and Richie apologised.

Richie screwed up his face. 'I'd just assumed that Bill or Mike would have,' Richie rambled, then cut himself off. 'That's no excuse. Sorry, man. I feel like a fucking jerk.'

'I'm not mad at you, Richie,' Stan reassured. 'I guess I've just felt a bit alone.'

'You know you're not though, right?' Richie asked, looking behind him as he noticed a flash of movement; Eddie making his way down through the grass. He waved.

'Hey,' Eddie greeted. 'You guys okay?'

Richie threw Eddie a look to indicate that Stan wasn't. 'Want to sit?'

Sitting beside Stan, Eddie said, 'I can't stop thinking about it either, you know.' He flicked his eyes at Richie. 'It helps to talk about it.'

Stan picked underneath his fingernails. 'I just want it all to be over. When we got out of that house, I thought it would be done for a while. It just doesn't stop.'

'No, it doesn't,' Eddie agreed, his gut gurgling.

'Face our fears,' Stan muttered. 'That's what Bill said. Face our fears before it's too late. How do you do that when you don't even know what it is you're most afraid of?' He sighed, 'I'm just afraid in general.'

Richie pushed his glasses up his nose. 'I don't know,' he said, trying to remain calm, hoping that his cheeks weren't burning red. He was glad he could rest his hands on the soft grass so that the others wouldn't see the sweat on his palms and the tremor in his fingertips.

'There must be a link,' Eddie said, thinking about the medication bottles which used to litter his nightstand. 'Like a root.'

'What do you mean?' Stan said.

He thought, 'Well, when you get sick, you go to a doctor, right?'

'You'd know,' Richie said.

Eddie glared at him. 'What you really want at the time, or what you think you want, is to treat the symptoms. But the doctor gives you a diagnosis. That's the root, and the symptoms themselves, they're tied to the root.'

Stan nodded, the analogy making sense to him. 'You need medicine which attacks the root, not just what masks the symptoms.'

'But what's the medicine?' Richie swallowed. Heart sinking inside him, guilty and burdened, he asked bravely, 'What if you don't think there's a cure for you?'

Blinking at him, Stan said, 'We're talking about curing the fear, Richie. We don't need to cure the thing we're afraid of,' he chuckled. 'That doesn't even make sense.'

Eddie started to laugh, 'I'm just imagining you running around after clowns telling them they need your help.' As the image grew more ridiculous, Stan started to snicker too.

Richie wasn't laughing. Tightness in his chest, he picked himself up and started to leave. They didn't understand, couldn't understand, and he couldn't explain. 'Fuck you,' he spat.

'Richie?' Eddie's face dropped. It wasn't like Richie not to be able to take a joke.

Worried, Stan hollered, 'Richie, come back,' but Richie was already

gone. 'What was that about?' he spluttered as he turned to Eddie.

Eddie bit his lip. 'I don't know. He's been,' he cocked his head, 'different. The past few days, I mean.'

'I think we all have,' Stan said. 'How are you? Are you alright?'

Toying with the hem of his shorts, he sighed, 'About as alright as I can be, I suppose. You?'

'It's difficult to know how to process it,' Stan said brokenly.

'I keep thinking about my dad,' Eddie said quietly. 'His cancer. I keep thinking that it must feel like that. Knowing that there's a deadline.'

'I think it's worse for you,' Stan whispered.

Eddie hardened. 'Why?'

'Well, I don't know exactly when. I don't know why. I don't know where. Fuck,' he choked, 'You even vaguely know how. You know It does it.'

Eddie thought about this. 'I think in a weird way, of the two of us, I'd rather know than not know. I mean, fuck,' his eyes widened, 'surely knowing will help us figure out how to stop it from happening. In the meantime, I don't have to worry about all the things I used to. I'm not sick. I'm not going to get sick.'

Stan hadn't thought about it that way. 'I guess you're right. Until you need to come back to Derry, it's like you're protected.'

'And,' he knitted his eyebrows, 'when we made that oath, part of me wasn't sure if I'd be brave enough to come back, you know? But now, I know I will be.'

'And you know that coming back is a better option than not coming back. If you come back,' he nodded solemnly, 'there's a chance.'

Eddie's eyes watered, 'And even if things don't change, I know if I come back, at least It dies. That's the whole point, right?'

‘Unless I come back too,’ Stan whispered. ‘That throws everything off. I’m the unknown.’

‘There are a lot of unknowns,’ Eddie stressed, ‘but we’re at our best when we’re all together. We know that.’ He checked, ‘You know that, right?’

He stared out over the quarry. ‘I feel like a risk.’

Resolute, Eddie assured, ‘That we all want to take. Fuck, Stan, you’re not even a risk, you’re,’ he struggled, ‘a hope.’

Finally, for the first time that conversation, Stan looked at his friend. His friend who had somehow found comfort where he had been able to see none. He envied him for that. He loved him for sharing it with him, but he also felt the pressure building in his chest, as Eddie staked his life in Stan's hands.

‘Thanks, Eddie.’

---

It hadn’t been easy to get out to the farm by herself without anyone noticing, but Bev found herself at Mike’s door early on the morning of her leaving day. It was just after dawn, and she knew that Mike would be awake, doing his chores.

‘Bev? Hi!’ he swept her into his arms. ‘What are you doing here? I thought we were all meeting later?’

‘We are,’ Bev said, ‘but I really need to talk to you. Alone.’

Confused, Mike opened the door wider to let her over the threshold. She went upstairs to his bedroom, a place she had only seen once or twice before.

‘What’s this about?’ he asked.

She sat down on the bed and patted the space beside her. 'Bill came to me yesterday, wanting to know more about what happens to Stan, but I didn't tell him.'

'Why not?'

'It's too much for him,' Bev said. 'Before you ask, I think it's too much for any of us.'

Mike pursed his lips. 'Okay.'

'But it did get me thinking,' Bev sighed. 'Mike, I'm going to tell you something about your future, okay? At least, the future I've seen.'

Fists clenched on his bedclothes, Mike's stomach twisted. So far, he'd learned almost nothing about his own future, and he'd intended to keep it that way. 'Do I have to know?'

Bev put her hand on his thigh. 'Mike, you're the only one, in what I've seen, that's still in Derry.' She licked her lips, 'Which means –'

'I'm the one who'll know when It's back.' This was not the worst piece of information to have received. It had been likely, if anything, from the trajectory of his life so far, that this would have been the outcome. Not exciting, but not surprising.

Fishing into her backpack, Bev pulled out a letter. 'When the time comes,' she whispered, 'you can read this.' She locked his gaze, 'You have to swear to me that you won't read it before. It's too much to know for all those years.'

Mike took the letter from her hand. 'This is how we might be able to save Stan,' he guessed, and she nodded. 'But why can't you do this?' he asked. 'Surely, when the day comes, you'll know what to do.'

Biting her lip, she hypothesised, 'I think something happens to me. I think I forget what I've seen.' She chewed her fingernail, 'And I want to.'

Even though it meant that she might marry a man capable of her murder, it was some relief to know that she would forget the vision of Stan's suicide, with the scrawl on the bathroom tile, the blood

splattering the bathroom like when It had visited her earlier that summer.

She wanted to forget Eddie's car crash, with the broken glass of the windscreen shattering in slow-motion as he reached for a pill bottle, medication caps popping and exploding red, green and blue; and Richie's accidental overdose, with his pupils dilated so wide that you could no longer see the blue of his irises through his glasses, froth bubbling and leaking from his Trashmouth.

Especially, she wished she could forget Ben's heart attack, with his lean body crumpling to the ground, resting undiscovered for days in a house too large and beautiful for one man to occupy; and Bill's aneurysm, slumped over a typewriter, with his eyes wide and staring at the unfinished pages of a book, a final, hideous zap in his brain forcing his last words to be: 'You'll float too.'

Not to mention Mike's brutal end as It came for him alone, dragging him howling into It's well, hands clawing at the stonework.

'Swear to me that you won't read it until It returns,' Bev insisted, holding up her scarred hand, a reminder of their blood oath.

Mike clasped their hands together.

'I swear, Bev. I swear.'

### **Notes for the Chapter:**

Thank you so much for all the support I've had so far writing this !

## 5. Nothing

### Summary for the Chapter:

Eddie goes to find out why Richie ran away from him and Stan at the quarry.

Ben goes to visit Bev one last time before she leaves Derry.

Stan goes to find out why Bill hasn't been the same kind of friend that Richie has been to Eddie.

'I thought I might find you here,' Eddie said, climbing down into the clubhouse.

Richie was sat in the hammock, staring up at the ceiling. 'Fuck off, Eddie.'

'No,' Eddie said matter-of-factly, swanning over to him. When Richie didn't look at him, he scoffed, 'What? Had enough of me now?'

Richie's eyelids flickered, and instantly tears shimmered. 'That's not fair.'

'What was that, Richie?' Eddie asked, shaking his head. 'For the first time since what we saw, Stan was actually smiling. Laughing. He needs you right now. I need you. For a bit of fucking normal. Then you just upped and left after one fucking joke?'

Richie got up and pushed past him, 'Honestly, Eddie, if I wanted to talk about it, I would.' He made his way towards the ladder.

Eddie spiralled around, face growing hot and pink, 'You can't keep doing this. You can't just leave when the conversation goes somewhere you don't like.'

'Yeah, I can,' Richie retorted. 'It works really well.'

'No,' Eddie said, stepping in front of him, leaning back on the ladder to block it. 'You're staying and you're telling me what's going on with you.'

‘Two choices, Eds,’ Richie said melodramatically, raising two fingers. ‘Either I leave or I lie. It’s up to you.’

Eddie batted his hand away, pleading loudly, ‘Why can’t you just tell me the truth?’

Clapping his hands on Eddie’s cheeks, Richie yelled, ‘Because I never tell the fucking truth, Eddie!’ He sighed, softening his grip, ‘Or hardly ever, anyway.’

‘Try it,’ Eddie snapped.

Richie pouted and stepped back, shoving his hands in his pockets. Smiling, he admitted, ‘I’m not scared of clowns, Eddie. That was a lie.’

Confused, Eddie said, ‘Okay.’ He didn’t know why Richie would lie about something like that, admit he had a fear that he didn’t.

‘And I lied when I said that I didn’t see It this summer.’

Eddie’s brow furrowed. He felt oddly betrayed by this confession. ‘What?’ he said, curt. The other Losers had bared their souls, bared their innermost weaknesses and vulnerabilities, let themselves be humiliated and embarrassed and teased, for the sake of sharing, bonding, helping.

‘I saw It,’ Richie said flatly, but progressively grew more frenetic, ‘Twice, actually. One time it was a werewolf in a letterman jacket and the second time was as Paul Bunyan in the park and yes, I shit my pants and no, when I saw Pennywise in the Neibolt house it was not the first time so yes, apparently only virgins can see that shit because no, I never fucked your mom.’

‘I figured that bit,’ Eddie said quietly.

‘And when we saw what we did the other day,’ Richie choked, talking too quickly for the words to form properly, ‘I lied about why I cried like that because I didn’t know how to say that I’d just watched one of my absolute worst fears come to life before my very fucking eyes. The thought of losing you,’ he gestured, struggling, ‘I can’t even begin to explain how much that scares me.’

‘Richie,’ Eddie said softly, trying to move closer to him, but Richie only stepped further back.

He was crying now, but he didn’t seem to notice. ‘And I’ve been scared of that long before It came into the picture, because there’s more than one fucking way you can lose somebody.’

Eddie had no idea what this meant. ‘What do you –?’

Richie cut him off, lost in his tirade, ‘And if you only knew just how many lies I tell every fucking day so I don’t have to say what’s actually going on in my fucking head and really be me because I know if I was, then I’d lose you. And everyone else, for that matter.’ He wiped his eyes and spat, ‘So there. How’s that? Real enough for you?’

His lips curling, brows knitting, Eddie almost laughed at the absurdity, ‘What the fuck are you talking about, Richie?’ He stepped closer to him and locked his gaze, needing him to see the sincerity. ‘There is nothing you could do or say or be that would make you lose me. That’s fucking crazy.’

‘Oh, it’s crazy?’ Richie laughed sarcastically.

‘Yeah, it’s crazy,’ Eddie hammered.

Richie licked his lips and stepped closer to Eddie, ‘You don’t even know what you’re promising.’

‘I do.’

‘You don’t!’ Richie denied.

‘I mean it,’ Eddie pressed, stepping closer still, having to tilt his chin up to sustain eye contact. ‘No way. There’s no way. There’s nothing.’

Scoffing, Richie tested, ‘Nothing?’

‘Nothing!’

‘Fine!’ Richie shouted, grabbing for Eddie’s arms, then kissed him.

Stumbling backwards, Eddie bit Richie's lip as he tore away. 'What the fuck?' he stammered.

'Nothing?' Richie shrugged, trying to look smug, but he only looked defeated as his lower lip throbbed. When Eddie didn't say anything, he nodded and said with resign, 'That's what I thought.'

He swept past Eddie again and climbed the ladder out of the clubhouse, heart pounding in his chest furiously and painfully, as though it wanted to burst through his lungs and splinter his ribcage.

Panicked, he ran.

---

Ben had spent a lot of time crying. He was trying not to now, as he gathered all the strength in his bones to knock on Bev's door for what he suspected was the final time.

'Ben?' she greeted.

'Hi,' he chirped.

'What are you doing here? I'll see you all in a couple hours before I go.' Her eyes were gentle, tender. Ben wished he had another poem for her about them.

'I know. I just,' he stumbled, feeling stupid. 'I heard that you broke up with Bill.'

'It's okay. He's okay. I'm okay.'

'Well,' he gulped, 'I never would have said anything, because Bill's my friend, and you're my friend, and maybe, some little part of me thought that,' he choked, 'maybe I'd grow up and I wouldn't look like me anymore, and then,' he blotted the tear on his cheek quickly.

'Ben,' she said gently.

'But it doesn't happen that way. I know it doesn't because we've seen it,' he said. Handsome, yes. Lean, yes. Married? No.

Bev reached for his trembling hand, 'What are you trying to say?'

He exhaled, 'You were the first person who was ever really nice to me, and I wouldn't be a Loser if it wasn't for you. I think you're the funniest, kindest, strongest person in the world, and if there was anything I could do that would make sure you ended up happy, then I would do it in a second, because,' he sighed, 'I love you.'

She didn't say anything, but she smiled.

He said gently, 'And I don't need you to say it. I just wanted you to know, and you deserve to know. I was putting it off until someday, but I think we've all realised that someday might never come, or it might be too late, so I want you to know *now* that I love you with all my heart, and I always will. And I hope you find someone to love you like that, that you love too.'

Not knowing quite what to say at first, she bent down so that her head was level with his, her eyes level with his eyes, placing her hands on each of his shoulders. She tried to remember how he looked at her right now, the first person to ever say that they loved her and mean it.

Eventually, she said, 'You've got the biggest heart I've ever seen, New Kid, and you're the best friend I've ever had. I love you for that.' Then she pressed her lips softly to the apple of his cheek. 'I hope you never change.'

---

Bill was bent over his desk, periodically switching between writing and drawing, trying to clear his mind of all the words and images that he couldn't bear to keep pondering.

He heard a knock on his bedroom door. Whipping around, hastily

placing a protective hand over his work, he was surprised to see Stan in the doorway. 'H-hey,' he said, then quickly glanced away. 'Are you alright?'

Stan slumped on the bed. 'Not really. Just been down at the quarry. Bumped into Richie and Eddie.'

'Oh yeah?' Bill said querulously, trying to force the image of Stan's bloodied corpse out of his mind.

'You know, Eddie's doing so much better than I thought he would be, because I know how fucking hard this has been for me,' Stan said, strained, 'but he's had Richie right there, every day, whenever he needed him. So all I want to know is, where have you been?'

It didn't sound attacking. It sounded hurt. Sad. Bill's heart broke, but he didn't say anything.

Stan relented, 'I know Bev's leaving. That must hurt. I wish I could have talked to you about it, but it feels like you've completely shut me out.' He closed his eyes, 'Right when I've needed you most.'

Bill sniffed, 'I've b-b-been trying to h-help. T-talking to B-Bev and B-Ben and M-Mike. T-trying to f-find out how to s-s-stop it.'

'Could've told me,' Stan said, vaguely annoyed. 'Surely it'd help you if I was there for that?'

Shaking his head, Bill said definitely, 'No.'

'No?'

'N-no,' Bill said again, quieter.

Stan swallowed, 'Eddie said it's really helped to know roughly what happens to him. He thinks that will make it easier to stop.'

Bill warned, 'It's different f-for Eddie. He knows that It's to b-blame. W-what if I t-told you that you d-died of f-food poisoning? You'd b-be scared every t-time you ate.'

Narrowing his eyes, Stan asked, 'How do *you* know I don't?'

Shifting, Bill stammered, 'I d-d-d-don't.'

Stan stood, 'You know what happens. You asked her.' He stormed over to Bill, 'Why would you do that? Why wouldn't you tell me?'

'S-Stan,' Bill struggled, smacking his lips together as he desperately tried to avoid meeting his eyes.

'What gives you the right?' He stooped to bring his face closer to Bill's, 'And why won't you fucking look at me?' His eyes flicked to the desk over Bill's shoulder, 'And what the hell are those?'

His eyes widening, Bill lurched behind him, scrambling to turn the pages over, but it was too late. Stan launched himself simultaneously and tore the artwork and essays from Bill's frantic hands. As he stood, chasing him, Bill blurted, 'Stan, no. Please, p-please, don't -'

Stan scanned the images which Bill had drawn, time and time again, in a thousand different angles and colour palettes, some more disturbing and detailed than others, some merely line drawings or illusory. He read fragments of text, the phrases which repeated, the sentiments both beautiful and haunting, the realities and the fixes, the fears and the hopes.

'Bill? What are these?' he asked, as though he didn't know, the tears slipping over his cheeks like synchronised divers.

Bill was motionless, embarrassed, ashamed of himself, terrified of what he had just inadvertently done: provided Stan with comprehensive illustration and description of his death at an indeterminate age.

Stan took a shaky step towards him, 'Bill?'

Bill threw his arms around him as Stan collapsed against his chest, scrunching the pages in his hands. A thousand broken apologies left Bill's lips as Stan's pain leached from every square inch of his being. Eventually, he managed to say, 'I'm going to f-fix it. We'll f-f-find a way. We love you, we w-won't let it h-happen. I'm going to s-s-stop it.'

Stan slid to the ground, his arms clutching around Bill's knees. 'I'm

the only one who can stop that.'

Bill sank down to meet him, and forced himself to look into his eyes, 'You w-will. And I'm g-going to h-help you. I will. I s-swear.'

As he saw the desperation in Bill's eyes, Stan's insides shredded. 'I love you, Billy, but you shouldn't swear something like that.'

Ready to make the promise again, Bill felt Stan's hand squeeze his, begging him not to. So, instead, he simply said, 'I love you too, Stan.'

---

Richie stood at the kissing bridge, bent over the wooden panelling, heaving great panting breaths, tasting the iron in his mouth having ran until his lungs burned. He stayed there until his ears stopped pounding, until his heart rate lowered, until his legs steadied and his vision cleared.

Behind him, he heard a faint clattering of footsteps, which grew louder and louder, then stopped.

Richie froze, not turning around, praying that it wasn't Eddie, that Eddie hadn't followed him all this way.

Through ragged breaths, a desperate voice promised, 'Nothing.'

His jaw clenched, his knees locked. He didn't move.

Slowly, Eddie walked up behind him, his steps patting, measured, on the concrete. 'You hear me, Tozier?' He reached for Richie's arm to pull him round. 'Nothing.'

Instinctively, Richie closed his eyes and lowered his head, not believing the words he was hearing, not prepared for Eddie to start pretending that he was okay.

'I'm here, Richie,' Eddie said carefully. 'I'm still here.'

His face crumpling, Richie broke down into tears, and as Eddie's arm wrapped around him, he let himself sink into the embrace, quietly mumbling, 'I'm sorry, I'm so sorry, Eddie.'

Eddie pulled his head back far enough that he could see Richie, their foreheads resting together. 'Richie,' he whispered softly, bringing his palm to Richie's face and swiping at the tears with his thumb.

'I'm sorry,' Richie said again, opening his eyes for the first time, seeing Eddie's face again, no longer shocked and reeling, but soft, gorgeous and kind.

As their gaze locked, Eddie felt that fizzing spark inside himself that he knew only appeared around Richie, and as his nervous hands clutched at the curls on the nape of Richie's neck, he pressed their lips together.

Richie broke away, 'Eddie?'

'Beep beep,' Eddie hushed, then kissed him again, hard, something powerful and electric and urgent soaring inside him. He felt wonderful, he felt beautiful, and he accepted the love that he held in his heart with ease and grace.

Pulling away again, Richie stared at him with wide eyes and unsmiling lips. 'I don't understand,' he said quietly. 'Are you fucking with me?'

'No,' Eddie said, drawing his hand back around to Richie's cheek. Concerned, he whispered, 'You look scared.'

'I am,' Richie admitted. 'I'm scared and I'm confused.'

Eddie bit his lip, 'Me too.'

Brushing the tip of his nose against Eddie's, Richie hesitated, but when he saw that Eddie had closed his eyes, he brought their lips together once more, softly, patiently, innocently.

Staring at him adoringly, sympathetically, his heart breaking, Eddie realised, 'This is what you've been afraid of all this time. You're afraid of,' he placed his hand on Richie's chest, 'you.'

‘Yeah,’ Richie clenched his jaw.

‘But,’ Eddie furrowed his brow, ‘you said you weren’t afraid of clowns.’

Richie scoffed, ‘Oh, fuck off.’

Eddie laughed, ‘I’m sorry, I just couldn’t resist.’ Then he softened and promised, ‘I’m not afraid of you, Richie.’

He swallowed, face dropping, ‘I feel like you should be.’

‘Are you afraid of me?’

Richie thought hard about this. ‘No.’

‘Well,’ Eddie gulped, ‘we’re the same.’

His throat tightening, Richie breathed, ‘Yeah?’

‘I think so.’

Richie clasped his hands either side of Eddie’s neck and drew him into a warm, tender kiss. They stayed there, lost in each other, timeless and ageless, as the sun slipped behind a sheet of grey cloud.

‘I’m sorry I was such an asshole,’ Richie said.

‘You’re always an asshole,’ Eddie smiled.

‘Well, I’m sorry for running away then,’ he corrected. ‘Again.’

Eddie raised his eyebrows, ‘You can stop lying to me too.’

Richie sighed, ‘Yeah, okay. About the important stuff.’

‘Important stuff?’

Grinning, Richie jostled him, ‘I still want to be able to say I fucked your mom every now and then.’

With a groan, Eddie conceded, ‘Fine.’

‘We should get back into town. To say goodbye to Bev,’ Richie suggested.

Eddie nodded and started to walk in the right direction. When he realised Richie wasn’t following him, he turned, ‘Aren’t you coming, Trashmouth?’

Richie just stared at him as he realised where they were standing. To his right, the spot where he had seen his future self mourning Eddie’s death, and to his left, the carving he had made after being taunted by Pennywise: R + E. Then there was Eddie, in the centre of his field of vision, his best friend, his first love and now, his first real kiss.

‘Yeah, Spaghetti,’ he said, beaming. ‘I am.’

## 6. Your Own Advice

### Summary for the Chapter:

The Losers grow up and begin to drift apart.  
Bev leaves Derry.  
Bill worries about Stan.  
Eddie has news for Richie.

The Losers crowded around Bev's aunt's car, the boxes stacked in the back seats, the last of her luggage stuffed into the trunk. A whole life packaged into one Volkswagen.

Bev wanted to say goodbye to each of them in turn, for a few whispered words in each ear, unheard by the others.

'Mikey,' she said first, and they embraced. She whispered, 'You can do it, Mikey. We can do it. We know we can. So give yourself a break in the meantime, okay?'

Mike squeezed her tight. 'I swear,' he said, for the third time that day, and let her go.

'Trashmouth?' Bev opened her arms.

'Molly Ringwald,' he said nostalgically, falling into the hug. 'I'm really gonna miss you.'

Surprised and pleased that Richie hadn't made light of the situation, she decided against the jokes she'd intended to make. 'I'll miss you too. You can do that more, you know. Be honest.'

Richie glanced over her shoulder at Eddie, 'I'm trying.'

'Eddie,' Bev grinned, making a show of throwing her arms over him, since he was shorter even than her. 'Bet your mom's pleased I'm leaving.'

'Which is one reason I wish you could stay,' Eddie joked, but he was really laughing at the irony that his mother had been so terrified that Beverly would corrupt Eddie with her womanly wiles, when that was

the last thing she needed to worry about. Not that she liked Richie either, but that was beside the point.

Bev smiled carefully, 'Stan.'

He held her and whispered, 'This isn't going to be the last time you see me, okay?' It wasn't for her, it was for himself.

She cried; she couldn't help herself. 'Okay. Okay.'

'Bill,' she smiled, thinking about their last kiss, her hand on his cheek. She was glad they had shared it, but when they embraced, they embraced as friends, not as lovers.

He thought about their last conversation, the life she had told him she would lead, and said, 'Be n-nice to yourself, B-Bev. Someone sh-should be.'

'Same goes for you, Billy,' she whispered. 'Please take your own advice, for once.'

They parted. Ben hovered awkwardly, wondering why he had been saved for last.

'Come on, New Kid,' she said, beckoning.

He hesitated, but she swept him into her arms so tightly that he could barely breathe. 'Goodbye, Bev,' he said, because that was all he had left to say.

'Goodbye, Ben,' she said, almost inaudibly, then for the briefest second, brushed her lips against his.

He caught his breath and felt like the earth shifted beneath him. As his cheeks flushed scarlet, she grinned, a veil of tears glimmering in her eyes, and they stepped away.

'Bye, everyone,' Bev said one last time, holding her scarred palm up as both a feeble wave and a powerful reminder of when she expected to see them next.

They raised their palms in turn as Beverly climbed into the car and

drove away.

---

The Losers felt that the clubhouse seemed emptier once Beverly was gone. Derry seemed emptier. It was strange, since before that summer they had never been a unit of seven, but now that a piece was missing, the absence was shocking.

After Beverly's goodbye, Ben and Bill had grown slightly distanced from one another. Neither one was sure who's fault it really was. They wished they could talk to each other about the fact that Bev hadn't returned their correspondence, but both were embarrassed and hurt.

Without Bev, the Losers club didn't feel the same to Ben. He felt like she was his link, his reason for knowing them, being with them. Since Bill was the de facto leader, Ben felt that it was himself that should step down and move away. Soon, he left Derry altogether.

Mike's home-schooling brought its own problems as the Losers moved from middle school to high school, as the stress of standardised testing and bonding over shared classes somewhat ostracised him, let alone that the farm was further from town than the others' houses, and his responsibilities only grew more time-consuming.

Bill struggled with balancing his friendships. He found it harder and harder to find the time to see Mike out at the farm, found it more and more necessary to lose himself in creative outlets, to keep the demons at bay. He spent most of his time with Stan, who he still felt protective over, but he felt that Richie and Eddie had all but disappeared into each other, and he didn't know why.

Richie and Eddie knew why. It hadn't been deliberate, but once they had established their relationship, it became harder to spend time together comfortably with the other Losers around. Eddie felt this especially. He found it near impossible to behave naturally without

feeling guilty about the secrets he was keeping, the lies he was telling.

Richie was used to lying, and he managed to sustain a friendship with Stan, not least because he was one of the few that didn't know the nature of Stan's death, and he never mentioned it nor asked. Richie was also used to being flippant and casual; he didn't enjoy descending into the serious or the macabre, which while it provided Stan with some levity, it began to grate on Bill, who felt that he didn't really know who Richie Tozier really was anymore, that he was hiding behind a mask.

Of them all, it was Stan who felt that he had retained his connections, though it was often on a one-to-one basis than how it had once been, and he missed the banter and repartee which came from the group dynamic. Yet, he couldn't deny that his friendships had grown deeper, stronger.

Every Saturday, when he was once expected to go to synagogue, he rode out to visit and help Mike on the farm. In sophomore year, Stan even made the baseball team, and Mike practised with him tirelessly. Likewise, when Mike struggled with his homework, Stan put in the time to tutor, and Mike regaled Stan with the histories he had been most interested in that week.

With regards to school, Eddie and Stan were both in a lot of the same classes: Math, Economics, Chemistry, and spent a lot of time studying together. As for Richie, they still made time to go down to the arcade, where Stan was now formidable enough a competitor to beat Richie at Street Fighter, and they often went down to the quarry together to swim.

Occasionally, Stan was even privy to a night in with Richie and Eddie together. They felt more relaxed around him than they'd anticipated, feeling like they were able to sit close to one another on the sofa as they watched movies, that they could look each other in the eyes, brush arms and hands and knees without flinching. They never said anything explicitly, and Stan never asked, but what at first he suspected he soon knew, and he was glad they could share it with him, even in such small ways.

However, it was Bill that Stan found himself with most often. It was routine: they sat together at lunchtime, they cycled to and from school together, even after they both learned how to drive. Bill gave Stan the manuscripts for novellas he'd worked on, and Stan sat with Bill at his favourite birdwatching spots, while Bill doodled birds and asked Stan to tell him everything about them.

In his spare time, Stan researched just about everything he could on depression and suicide. When he read about novel treatments, he wished that he could talk to Eddie, but didn't think that Eddie liked to be reminded about that side of himself, nor did he want Eddie to be worried.

He didn't talk to Mike about it because he knew that Mike had already lost both of his parents tragically and didn't want to bring him another tragedy. He didn't talk to Richie about it because he was *Richie*, and Richie shied away from talking about that sort of thing.

But he did talk to Bill. A lot. Bill was capable of being quiet, of listening. He clearly found it reassuring that Stan was taking proactive steps rather than ignoring what he had been presented with, and it made Stan feel comfortable talking about it, because he knew Bill wanted to know, wanted to hear it.

When it was Bill's last day in Derry, he'd spent it with Stan.

'If you n-need anything, just call. Or write. Or go f-find Mike or Richie or Eddie, or s-something,' Bill rambled, plucking at the grass.

'I'm gonna be okay, Billy,' Stan said quietly, reaching out and grazing his little finger against Bill's.

Bill didn't hesitate to burrow his hand underneath Stan's and squeeze it. 'I know,' he said, even though he didn't. 'Maybe I just w-worry that I won't b-be.'

Stan sighed, 'I think it's time that you get out of this town. I know I can't wait to. You're gonna make new friends and go to college and be a writer and an artist and I promise I'll read all your books and go to all your gallery openings.' He grinned.

‘You really th-think I’m good enough?’

Nodding, Stan insisted, ‘Yeah! Although,’ he hesitated.

‘What?’

He leaned in a little closer to Bill, ‘Would it kill you to write a happy ending once in a while?’

Bill’s eyes flicked between Stan’s. ‘I th-think I just h-hate endings.’ His heart ached.

‘Maybe you need to stop thinking of them as endings,’ Stan suggested, smiling. Fleetinglly, he thought about Richie and Eddie, and wondered if maybe, just maybe, some part of him loved Bill in that way too.

Stan wasn’t sure if he imagined the way that Bill’s eyeline dropped to his mouth, the slight parting of his lips, the shudder in his chest, but he certainly thought he saw the idea of kissing him cross Bill’s mind before he said, ‘I n-need to g-go.’

‘I know,’ Stan sighed, getting to his feet.

Bill followed suit, then clapped his arms around Stan’s shoulders, hands in fists. Stan let his hands stroke gently up Bill’s back as he nestled his chin into the crook of his neck, and Bill relaxed under his touch.

‘Love you,’ Bill said, without stuttering.

‘Love you too,’ Stan said softly, and before he could ruminate on it too long, he craned to kiss the hollow of Bill’s cheek. It was only brief, a peck really, but they both blushed as though they were still thirteen years old.

---

‘New York?’ Richie spluttered, propping himself up on his elbows as they lay beside one another on his bed.

‘Yeah,’ Eddie said, looking up at him, hating the unreadable expression on Richie’s face.

‘You,’ Richie blinked. ‘You got in to Columbia?’

Eddie nodded, ‘I did.’

Richie broke into a grin and leapt on top of him, dragging him into a deeply uncomfortable and bruising hug. ‘Oh, you smug, smart asshole! I knew you could.’ He kissed across both his cheeks a dozen times before landing firmly on his lips. ‘College: here we come.’

‘But I thought you still wanted to go to Berkeley,’ Eddie said quietly. ‘We couldn’t be going further apart from each other.’

‘I’ve not decided anything yet,’ Richie said quickly.

Eddie cocked his eyebrow, ‘Rich, you want to go. I know you do, and you should, it’s a fucking great school.’

‘But I’m not sure I’m cut out for the academic life,’ Richie shrugged. ‘I’ve been thinking about trying stand-up. Great comedy scene in New York, you know.’

‘Don’t you have to be funny to be a comedian?’ Eddie teased, and Richie clutched his chest, mortified. ‘You have your whole life to do comedy, Rich. You only get to do college once.’

Richie groaned, ‘You’re starting to sound like my mom.’

‘I didn’t tell you I got in to Columbia so that you could change your plans for me,’ Eddie said gently.

‘Who says I am?’ Richie challenged.

‘If I was going to California, you’d be singing a different tune and you know it.’ Eddie sighed, ‘And I know it because I know you.’

Richie pushed his glasses up his nose and let Eddie go. Unsteadily, he

lay back down and stared up at the blank ceiling. 'I don't want to break up, Eds.'

Lacing their fingers together, Eddie said, 'I don't want to either.'

'It's like two and a half thousand miles,' Richie swallowed. 'What is that? A six hour flight?'

'Eight,' Eddie corrected. 'I checked.'

Richie clenched his jaw, 'We're never going to fucking see each other. I can't,' he choked, 'I can't even think about what that would be like. I've seen you nearly every day for the last ten fucking years.'

'I know.'

'So what do we do?' Richie asked, trying and failing to swallow the lump in his throat.

Eddie rolled onto his side, his arm grazing over Richie's chest, then kissed him deeply. 'We try and make it work and we hope for the best.'

Richie's face crumpled. 'Yeah?'

Smiling, Eddie nodded, 'Yeah. I love you, Trashmouth.'

Cupping his jaw, Richie kissed him again, 'I love you too, Spaghetti.'

---

Mike had figured out that something happened when people left Derry, just as Beverly had predicted all those years ago. A forgetting, entire people and places and events shrouded in black and swept to the dark recesses of the attic.

It broke his heart to think of his friends wandering through their lives without knowing who he was, without knowing who each other

were, how important they had been to one another. He worried for them, even knowing that they should all be returning to Derry in the future, thanks to the letter which Beverly had left him, which he somehow had managed not to read, no matter how much it begged at him.

He didn't know that Beverly had forgotten the love she had received from both Bill and Ben, the genuine male friendship she had shared with Stan, Richie, Eddie and Mike, how she traipsed through dangerous relationships searching for validation, appreciation, never sure why she couldn't find the man she thought some part of her really deserved, never sure why she found it so hard to sustain platonic friendships with men.

He didn't know that Ben had forgotten the girl who occupied the space in his heart which just never seemed to be filled, no matter how much love he poured into each building he designed, how much love he tried to give to the women who captured his attention, how much ice cream and saturated fat he allowed himself to eat. For some reason, something always felt off, missing, like he was standing on shaky foundations.

He didn't know that Richie had forgotten the acceptance he'd received from Eddie, and the relationship which he'd shared with him, sending him hurtling back into a closet of well-worn personalities: jester, prankster, foul mouth, wannabe playboy. There were so many jokes which toppled out of his mouth at each stand-up gig that he'd told before, but couldn't remember when, couldn't remember who to.

He didn't know that Eddie had forgotten that his medications were merely placebos, that his mother had indoctrinated him with a deeply neurotic hypochondria of which he couldn't place the origin, and so sought another human being to validate his irrational concerns. As he popped his pills each morning, his supplements every afternoon, his vitamins every evening, he grew increasingly engaged in dieting and exercise, but still always believed he could be healthier.

He didn't know that Bill had forgotten the day that his brother had died and didn't know why he found himself afraid of travelling by boat, why the colour yellow turned his stomach over. He had

forgotten his knowledge of Stan's death, but didn't know why he found himself appalled at the idea of a bath over a shower, why he chose to trim his beard electrically rather than shave, why he was so obsessed with ensuring that the characters in his novels always found their way to a happy ending.

He didn't know that Stan had forgotten what It threatened to do to him, to take his life with fear before he even had the chance to return to Derry and reunite with his friends. He married Patricia Blum, he moved to Atlanta, he became an accountant and Little League baseball coach. Something coiled inside him, though, like a snake lurking at the bottom of a basket, writhing in the dark. Sometimes, he wanted to reach out, be honest with his wife, but he never quite felt like he could.

Mike didn't forget, but he wanted to let himself breathe, even in the stagnant Derry air. He became the librarian, and when he met Angela Trent, a historian who had recently moved to the neighbourhood, he let himself fall in love with her in a way he never thought possible in a town like Derry.

In her, he saw the life that he'd always wanted to lead; travelling across the United States uncovering beautiful secrets and fatal lies, retelling the stories of the forgotten. After only a year of knowing one another, Mike found himself on one knee.

She said yes.

## 7. It's Mike Hanlon

### Summary for the Chapter:

Angela has a question for Mike.

It returns.

Mike calls Bill, Bev, Ben, Richie and Eddie.

‘Mikey?’ Angela said one day, when they were at dinner.

Mike looked at his fiancée, enjoying the nostalgia of the nickname but instantly concerned by the leading tone in her voice. ‘Yeah, baby?’

‘Do you ever think about leaving Derry?’

Smacking his lips together, Mike admitted, ‘I do.’

‘I do too,’ she said, clearly relieved, then said, ‘There’s a job opening at the University of Florida. I think it’d be perfect for me.’

‘Oh,’ Mike said, reaching out for her. ‘Oh, baby, I wish I could go right now, but there’s a few more bits of research that I still need to do.’

She put her knife and fork down with a clatter, ‘You’ve been researching this town for the best part of the last quarter of a century. How much more could you possibly have to do?’

His heart burned, unable to explain the truth, that it was imperative he stay until It returned, that he know all the ins and outs of the town’s surface area, that he know every face and story, every house and journey. His friends couldn’t be relied upon to remember. He needed to know it all. After It was gone, he’d be free.

‘What if I promised you that it would be over in just a couple years?’ Mike tried, not even knowing if it was true.

‘Years?’ she repeated. ‘Mike, this job is open *now*. It’ll be gone in a couple of years. I don’t want you to be.’

Mike didn't want to suffocate her, but he hated the thought of her forgetting him. 'If you want the job, you should go for it, baby. I won't stop you.'

'But you won't come with me,' she finished, sighing.

'A couple of years,' he tried again, desperately.

She leaned over the table to kiss him. 'One of these days, you're going to have to stop living in the past,' she said sadly, 'And that's coming from a career historian, Mikey.'

'I love you, Ange,' Mike said, stroking his hand through her hair. 'I promise, I'll come after you. When it's all over, I'll get you back.'

She caressed his cheek, 'Then I suppose I'll be seeing you.' With a twist, she pulled the engagement ring off her finger and placed it in his palm. 'Someday.'

---

Rubbing his hands together, Bill waited impatiently for Audra to finish reading his latest manuscript. 'Well?' he asked, once she'd turned the final page.

She nodded, 'It's good.'

'What's wrong with it?' he said immediately.

Sighing, she admitted, 'There's nothing wrong with it. If this was your first novel or even your third or fourth, it'd probably be a bestseller and I'd be singing its praises.'

'Then what's the issue for it being my twelfth?'

Audra bit her lip. 'Well, I've read them all, and I know you very well and the way you write and so, for me, they're getting a little,' she seethed, 'predictable.'

It was one of the worst words an author could hear. 'Predictable?'

'You write horror, darling, and yet I never really feel like the characters are in any danger. I know the happy ending is coming, eventually. All the little loose ends will get wrapped up and the good guys will win.'

Bill shuffled, 'But every fairy tale ends the same way. They lived happily ever after. That doesn't stop them from being great stories.'

'And great clichés,' Audra added. 'You might need to take a little more of the Brothers Grimm approach, rather than Disney.'

'Disney,' Bill said flatly. His mobile rang. He didn't recognise the number. 'Hello?'

'Bill, it's Mike. From Derry.'

Bill slid into the cushion of the sofa. 'Mike. Hello. M-Mike. Mike Hanlon.'

'Who's Mike Hanlon?' Audra hissed.

'You need to come home, Bill. It's time.'

Bill didn't even know why he said what he said next, only some part of him felt that it was important. 'S-Stan.'

'Who's Stan?' Audra asked, more insistently.

Mike answered, 'I haven't called him yet. Don't worry, Bill. We have a plan, okay?'

'Do we? W-what is it? Where is h-he? Should I f-f-find h-him?' Bill rambled, clawing his hands through his beard.

'Just get yourself to Derry, Bill, okay? Let me sort the rest.'

'But he's,' Bill's eyes threatened to spill over, 's-still alive?'

Mike said, 'Bill, stop worrying about Stan. You need to focus on you. Get yourself here. I'll see you soon.'

'I n-need to go to Maine,' Bill said, staring at the phone after Mike had hung up.

Audra stared at him. 'I can't go. I have to work.'

'But I n-need to go. I'm s-sorry. I h-have to.' He thought about Stan. Stanley. Stanley Uris.

He leapt for the drawers on the far side of the room, pulling out his address books. When he found nothing, he went to the phone books, looking for a Stanley Uris, but he couldn't find one. So he went to his laptop and typed the name into the search engine.

There was a headline from a local newspaper: *Little League Baseball Team Wins State-wide Championships*. There in the centre of the squad was the coach, unmistakably Stanley Uris, confirmed by the caption. Bill scanned the article, and found the name of the local school, from a suburb in Atlanta.

'What are you doing?' Audra asked, watching her husband with blind panic. She had never heard him stutter so frequently.

Bill scrambled for a few basic possessions and hurtled for the front door. 'I'm g-going to Georgia.'

'Georgia?' Audra repeated. 'I thought you were going to Maine?'

'Georgia f-first.' Then he was gone.

---

Bev wandered into the bar, tugging at the short hemline of her dress. Her friend Donna waved her over from the far corner, where she had already been bought drinks by some of the men in the booths.

'Bevvy!' she greeted, beckoning with manicured fingernails, chewing gum, the Long Island accent still potent after all these years away from her hometown. 'What's wrong? You look thin. You want a new

dietician? My Dr Jensen, oh, he's just the best.'

'I'm fine, D,' Bev said, but she didn't sound convinced. She tugged a curl behind her ear, and Donna noticed the purple sheen even through the thick layer of makeup.

'How's Tom?' Donna asked, blinking her false eyelashes.

'Over,' Bev said. 'Bastard hit me.'

Donna shook her head. 'You sure know how to pick them, sweetheart. What's this? The third in a row to go this way?'

Bev groaned, 'I thought he was different. He wasn't a washout like the rest. He was smart and successful, and he was helping me with work, helping me get my designs out there. Guess I thought he actually wanted something good for me.'

'Men,' Donna dismissed. 'Honestly, these days, I wish I was like my old hairdresser Tina. She's got herself one of those butch lesbian girlfriends. Says the sex is way better but she still insists on paying for stuff.'

Bev laughed, despite herself. Then her phone rang, from an unknown number, so she excused herself. Stood outside under the dim glow of the lamplight, she answered the call.

'Bev?' came the voice down the line.

'Who is this?'

'It's Mike. Mike Hanlon.'

Bev steadied herself on a lamp post. 'Mike. Oh my God, Mike. Hello. Hi.'

'It's time to come home, Bev. To come back to Derry.'

She was about to refute this, then looked at her own palm, the scar which before this moment, she could never recall the origin. 'Okay, Mike. I'll be there as soon as I can.'

---

Ben wandered back into his house with Francesca, rubbing his temples. 'Why is it such a big deal?' he asked.

Francesca swanned in behind him, 'Oh, I don't know. I'm just tired, Ben. I'm tired of making every single decision for us.'

'You just asked me if I wanted to leave the party or not,' Ben sighed.

She began tugging the bobby pins out of her bleached blonde hair, the tresses falling down in kinked waves. 'And you answered the same way that you always do: whatever you want, Fran.'

'What do you mean?'

She balled her hands into fists. 'What do we have for dinner? Whatever I want. Where do we live? Wherever I want. Who do we hire? Whoever I want. When do we go out on the weekends? Whenever I want. I want, I want, I want, I want. Do you want anything, Ben? What about what *you* want?'

He sighed, shrugging off his jacket. The buttons gaped on the lower half of his shirt. 'I just want you to be happy, Fran, that's all.'

She pushed out onto the balcony to breathe in the night air. 'It makes me feel like I don't know you. I feel like I'm put on some pedestal that I can't possibly live up to. Worst of all, I feel like I make you martyr everything and anything. I feel like I'm always making you sacrifice your own happiness for the sake of mine.'

'But I want to make those sacrifices,' he tried.

She blurted, exasperated, 'I never asked you to! For goodness sake, Ben, you need to put yourself first sometimes. It's not healthy. This is supposed to be a balance. Sometimes I'm supposed to be the one who compromises.'

‘Okay,’ he said. ‘Okay, whatever you –’ he cut himself off.

With a sigh, she said, ‘Only you could make agreeing to compromise feel like you’re making another sacrifice.’

His phone rang.

‘Answer the phone, Ben,’ she demanded, pushing past him and back into the house. ‘I’m going to get a drink.’

‘Ben? It’s Mike Hanlon.’ Mike’s voice leaked through the speaker.

‘I need to come to Derry,’ Ben said instantly. ‘I’ll go and pack.’

Fran came out of the kitchen to find Ben pulling down the suitcases from on top of the wardrobe. ‘What are you doing?’

‘I need to go to Maine,’ he said.

‘Maine?’ she spluttered. ‘You haven’t been there since you were a kid.’

‘It’s important. Some friends who need me.’

Fran reached for his hands, rubbing at his pudgy fingers. ‘Do you want me to come with you?’

‘No, I don’t.’

‘What?’ Fran blinked at him.

He smiled, ‘I don’t want that. You asked me what I want. I don’t want you to come. Stay here.’

She nodded, shocked at his sudden resolve. ‘Okay. Okay, I will.’

He leaned in and kissed her, ‘I love you. I’ll see you when I get back.’

---

‘Richie, we’ve got to talk,’ Joanna insisted, storming into his dressing room. She’d been his agent for nearly fifteen years, and Richie was still terrified of her. Not that he’d tell her so.

His head aching dreadfully from the night before, Richie chased aspirin with whiskey. ‘About what?’

‘The rumours, Richie,’ she said, slapping a tabloid article in front of his face. ‘Rumours that you’ve been frequenting a hotel in West Hollywood with some twink.’

Richie scoffed, ‘What? That’s ridiculous.’

‘Oh, is it?’ Joanna asked, lighting up a cigarette despite the confined space, no windows. ‘Because I distinctly remember dealing with some similar issues in the past. There was the time you were spotted outside *that* bar. Then there was that guy that you kept getting photographed with.’

‘There were only two photographs,’ Richie grumbled, stealing one of her cigarettes. ‘And it was ten years ago.’

‘Couldn’t you start dating that Sandy broad again?’ Jo sighed.

‘No,’ Richie mumbled as he lit the end and took a drag.

Joanna perched on the edge of the counter whilst he saw off his drink. ‘Look, I’ve been in this business for a long time, and despite how much energy I spend on you, you’re not my only client. I know that you’ve got your own life and you’ve consistently brought me solid material, but in a job like this, image is everything. Nobody’s going to buy the fuckboy dilettante Trashmouth if he keeps getting publicity like *this*.’

Richie stared at the picture and the article with disdain. ‘It’s not true,’ he lied pitifully.

Picking at a flake of ash on her tongue, Joanna said, ‘Luckily for me, you’re enough of a screw up in every other aspect of your life that these stories are easier to bury. God forbid you actually get yourself together.’

'Love these talks, Jo. Ever thought of pursuing your true calling of therapy?'

She rolled her eyes, 'Two minute call, Tozier. Wash your fucking face.' Then she stormed out.

His phone buzzed angrily on the counter, inching closer to the lip. He answered, 'Who's this?'

'Mike Hanlon. Hi, Richie.'

'Excuse me,' Richie said briefly, then scrambled for the corner sink where he vomited. 'Okay, I'm good. Go ahead.'

'You need to come back to Derry, Richie.'

Richie's brain slammed. 'Yeah, okay. I'll come. Then I'll catch a flight.'

'You haven't changed,' Mike laughed and hung up.

Glaring at his reflection, Richie sighed, 'No. I haven't.'

---

Eddie popped the caps on each of his medication bottles, swilled the pills with water, then closed the bathroom cabinet. He pulled at the skin under his eyes, thinking that he looked peaky.

'Eddie!' a voice hollered from the other room. 'I made you your smoothie.'

Groaning, Eddie trudged into the kitchen. He eyed the plastic bottle on the counter with disgust. 'I don't think I can stomach it today. How has it not been twelve weeks yet?'

'Just three more to go,' Eric promised, looking up from the eggs he was poaching. He studied Eddie's face. 'You look tired. Have you

been taking your supplements?’

Eddie swiped the flask from the surface and slotted it carefully into his briefcase. He rolled his eyes, ‘Yes.’

Eric scolded, ‘Don’t give me that look.’

‘There was no look,’ Eddie denied. ‘I’m sorry. Bad dreams all last night. Feeling really anxious, like,’ he breathed shallowly, ‘something bad is going to happen.’

Eric waved his spatula dismissively. ‘Take a couple beta-blockers. Get yourself one of those herbal teas from that place on Bleecker.’

All Eddie wanted was a hug, for him to say that there was nothing to worry about, that it was all going to be okay. ‘Yeah, maybe I will. Bye.’

Eric reached for Eddie’s hand and pulled him close enough to kiss. It was cold; simple routine. He reminded, ‘I’ll see you at spin class at lunch, okay?’

Eddie’s legs still burned from the day before. ‘Ugh, okay.’

As Eddie strapped into his car, part of him wished that the engine wouldn’t start, that his tyre would burst, that his steering would lock. He didn’t want to go anywhere, do anything, be anyone. Exhausted, his forehead dropped onto the steering wheel. He stayed there for a few minutes, then started to drive.

His phone rang and he nearly punched it, wishing he could shatter the screen into a thousand pieces, especially when he realised it was an unknown number. Probably a cold caller. But it could be work, so he answered.

‘Eddie?’ Mike’s voice wavered. ‘It’s Mike Hanlon.’

Eddie didn’t say anything. He simply froze, losing himself in the lights of the traffic.

‘You need to come back to Derry, Eddie. How soon can you get here?’

Seeing the turnoff at the intersection, Eddie's voice trembled as he said, 'Pretty fucking soon.' Then he twisted the wheel and carted off down the highway.

## 8. The Bathroom

### Summary for the Chapter:

Mike finally musters the courage to call Stan.

Stan was doing a puzzle. In the kitchen, Patty was booking the final details of their planned trip to San Francisco.

His phone rang right before he was about to lay the final piece. 'Hello? Stanley Uris speaking.'

On the other end of the line, Mike crumpled Bev's letter in his hands, desperate that this conversation wouldn't be the last time that he heard Stan's voice. 'Hi, Stan. It's Mike.'

Stan's mind reeled. 'Hanlon,' he said, then tremored, 'It's back, isn't it?'

'I want you to come back to Derry,' Mike said carefully.

Freaked, Stan hung up on him, as images crashed into his brain with disturbing vigour, brutal clarity. His phone rang again, the same number, but he didn't answer it, staring at the illuminated screen with horror.

'Stan?' Patty called over from the kitchen. 'Who was that?'

'I don't know,' Stan said, and it didn't feel like a lie. He hadn't seen Mike Hanlon in twenty-seven years, after all. The phone rang again, and he tapped at the red button to decline the call. He got up and began pacing, rubbing his sweating palms on the seat of his trousers.

Patty's phone rang. She furrowed her brow, then answered. 'Hello. Patricia Uris speaking.'

'Hi, Patricia. My name is Mike Hanlon. We've never met, but I grew up with your husband, Stanley.' Mike spoke low, calm.

'Oh,' Patricia said, mildly shocked, since she thought she knew all of Stanley's friends, and she'd never heard of a Mike Hanlon. Then

again, she knew very little about Stan's childhood, whereabouts in Maine he'd spent his time, who he'd spent it with outside of his family. 'Hello. Would you like to speak to Stan?'

'No, I'd like you to listen to me. This is going to sound very strange. In a minute, your husband might tell you that he's going to have a bath. Don't let him.'

Patty laughed, 'What?'

'Don't let him,' Mike said again, aware that he sounded insane.

Patricia was about to hang up on the crazed caller, when she spotted Stanley walking towards the corridor with a strange look in his eyes. 'Stan? Where are you going?'

Stan didn't look at her. Idly, he said, 'I think I'm gonna take a bath, Patty.'

The phone slipped out of her hands and clattered onto the floor. 'What?' she stammered, 'At this time?'

He spoke monotonously, 'It helps me think.'

Hurried, she bent to scoop her phone off the floor, holding it up to her ear and hoping that Mike was still on the line. Trying not to sound too panicked, she asked, 'What do you need to think about in,' she breathed, 'in the bath?' It was for Mike's benefit.

Mike repeated himself. 'Patricia, do not let him get in that bath.'

'Why?' she hissed, as Stan started to walk down their corridor. She followed him, tentative, trying not to spook him. 'Stanley, why don't I just make us some coffee?'

He didn't look at her, ascending the stairs, robotic, 'That sounds lovely, Patty. I'll have it after I'm done, okay? I won't be long.'

Scared, Patricia tottered up the stairs after him, sliding past his stoic, lanky frame to stand in the threshold of the bathroom, still on the phone. 'Why shouldn't he have a bath?' she asked, loud enough for both men to hear.

Stanley froze, staring at her. 'Who's that?' he asked, pointing at the phone.

'His name is Mike. He says he's a friend of yours. Stan,' she asked flatly, 'is this some weird joke? What's going on? Why is he saying that you shouldn't have a bath?'

He swallowed, 'Give me the phone.' When she did, he brought it to his ear. 'Mike?'

'Please, Stan. I know,' his voice cracked, 'I know what you're thinking. It's okay. I know you're scared. I know it's a lot to take in, but I know that you can do this. You can. I want to see you. We all want to see you. We're all coming back. Bev, Ben, Richie, Eddie,' he listed.

'Bill,' Stan finished, lower lip quivering, holding up his palm so that he could see the slash scar. 'You don't have to worry, Mikey. I made an oath.' Then he hung up.

'Oath? What oath?' Patty spluttered, as Stan gently moved her aside and stepped into the bathroom.

'You're a good person, Patty,' Stan said, then closed the door and locked it.

She hammered on the frame, begging him to open up, but he didn't. She panicked when she realised that he had taken her phone in with him, so that she couldn't call Mike Hanlon back and ask for his advice. So, she did the only thing she could think of to do; she went back down to the kitchen and rummaged under the sink, searching for a screwdriver, because that bathroom door was coming down.

---

The flight was four hours from LA to Atlanta, and Bill had fidgeted the entire time. He was torn between being relieved that he didn't have to take phone calls from his concerned wife, and desperate to

call Mike back, to see if he'd yet contacted Stan, to see if he knew where Stan was.

On landing in Georgia, he called Mike immediately, but it went to voicemail, saying that the line was occupied. 'Shit,' he muttered. He ran out of the airport and took a cab to the closest bar he could find.

'Do you have a phonebook?' he asked the man behind the counter.

'Are you from the past?' the barman laughed.

Furious, Bill delved for his phone and tried Mike again. He picked up. 'Mike! Mike! It's B-Bill.'

'Bill, I can't talk right now, I'm trying to get back through to Stan,' Mike rattled.

Bill paced frantically. 'Where is h-he? I'm in Atlanta. Do you know h-his address?'

'You're in Atlanta?'

'Address, Mike! Address!'

He heard skittering sounds as Mike ruffled through papers. 'Three-one-two Blackthorn.' He paused for a moment, then said, 'Hurry, Bill.'

Bill's heart dropped like a stone as he hung up and hailed himself another cab. 'Three-one-two B-Blackthorn.'

'The burbs?' the cabbie quizzed. 'That'll cost you.'

'J-just drive.'

He did, agitated as Bill repeatedly requested that he pump the gas a little more.

'Why are you s-stopping?' Bill yelled.

'There's a stop sign!' the cab driver shouted back. 'You want me to get pulled over?'

Eventually, they turned on to Blackthorn and Bill hardly even let the cab roll to a halt before he was out of the taxi door, flinging fifties in the perplexed man's face with a demanding, 'Wait h-here.'

He pelted up to the front door and banged his fists against it, hollering loudly, hoping that someone was inside, that someone would hear him.

When Patricia Uris flung the door open, her hair was in disarray, her fingers clenched around the handle of a screwdriver, 'What? Who are you?' she screeched.

He pushed past her, 'Does S-Stan Uris live here? Where's your b-bathroom?'

'Who are *you* now?' Patty cried, following the stranger up her stairs. 'Is this some elaborate game to you?'

'Which one is the b-bathroom?' Bill yelled again, throwing open doors. 'Where is h-he?'

'It's that one!' she cried. 'I've been trying to get the damn door off but there's so many freaking screws.'

Bill didn't hesitate. He barrelled towards the door with his shoulder once, twice, three times. When it started to give, he hauled up his leg and kicked at the weak spot near the lock. It splintered and tore away from the jamb.

'Stan?' he called as he pushed into the room.

'Billy?'

Stan was huddled in the corner of the room, bare feet on the tiles, arms wrapped around his knees. The bath was full of water, but he was dry. On the lip of the porcelain, three razor blades were scattered idle, but clean.

Bill ran to him, dropping to his knees at his side. He clutched either one of Stan's cheeks, feeling the warmth in them, relishing even the wetness of his tears, as Stan grabbed for the fabric of his shirt, pulling him closer, so unbelievably glad to see his face, familiar even after all

these years apart.

'I couldn't do it, Billy, I couldn't do it,' he sputtered, his voice small, like he was still a kid. 'Something was trying to make me, but I wouldn't let it.'

'It's okay, it's okay,' Bill rocked him soothingly. 'I'm h-here. I'm here.'

'Stanley, what's going on?' Patty's voice quaked. She addressed Bill, 'I still don't know who you are.'

As Bill dragged one hand down his own face to restore himself, he wrapped his other over Stan's. Then he turned, 'I'm s-sorry. Normally I'm a lot less rude on f-first meeting. My name's Bill. I'm,' he glanced at Stan briefly, 'an o-old friend.'

'And not the first I've been told about today,' Patty shook her head, overwhelmed.

Bill knew he had to dissolve some of her tension. 'A m-mutual friend of ours, Mike, he called Stan. Maybe that's who you m-mean? He had some b-bad news for Stanley and m-me. I knew Stan w-would be upset, so I came to get h-him. We n-need to gather some things and then h-head to Derry.'

'Derry?'

Stan found his voice. 'It's where I grew up.' He swallowed, 'And I need to go back.'

'You're not going anywhere until you tell me what's going on,' Patty insisted.

Slowly, Stan levered himself to his feet, clutching onto Bill's arms. 'There's no time. We need to go now.'

'I've got a cab w-waiting,' Bill said.

Patty blinked rapidly. 'Am I on glue? First a man calls predicting the future and you want a bath at night and then you're talking about some oath and locking yourself in the john and then this random man shows up claiming he knows you and wants to whisk you away to

your childhood town where I've never been or heard you talk about and I'm supposed to just think that's fine?' She panted.

Stan released Bill so that he could place his hands on his wife's shoulders. 'This is something I have to do. Maybe I'll be able to explain one day. Until then, you're going to have to just trust me.'

Her eyebrows knitted together as she spotted the razor blades on the side of the bathtub, as she scanned the unfamiliar face of Bill Denbrough, as she recalled the unfamiliar voice of Mike Hanlon, as the steel of the screwdriver dug into the flesh of her palm.

'I'm not sure I can,' she said honestly.

He sighed, and kissed her on the forehead, then said, 'Bill, let's go.'

Stunned, she burst into tears, falling back against the broken door as Stan and Bill skirted past her and started to make their way into the bedroom to pack.

'Can I b-borrow some clothes?' Bill asked as they shoved items into a duffle.

'You didn't bring any?' Stan quizzed.

'No, I came straight h-here.'

Stan's eyes stung and he stopped what he was doing. 'Really?'

Bill looked at him. 'Of course I d-did.'

'I wasn't going to do it, Bill,' Stan stressed. 'I swear, I wasn't. I could see it, feel it even. It was in my head like I've already done it before,' he shuddered, remembering, 'and I suppose in a weird way, I have. But not this time. It wouldn't have happened like that, whether you were here or not.'

Reaching out for him, Bill squeezed some of Stan's trembling fingers. 'I j-just h-had to m-make sure.'

Stan nodded, 'And I'm glad you're here. I am.'

They finished their slapdash packing and went back out into the hall. Bill jerked his head towards Patty, who was still curled up on the bathroom tiles, and Stan went to her as Bill carried their bags.

‘I’ll be back soon, okay?’ Stan said, not knowing if he was lying to her or not.

‘I feel like everything’s upside down,’ she sniffled.

Stan nodded, ‘I know. I’m trying to put it right.’ Then he kissed her cheek and left.

---

Bill and Stan both sank into the aeroplane seats.

‘Well, that is not h-how I imagined it would b-be if I ever m-met your wife,’ Bill admitted.

Stan shook his head, ‘It’s ironic, really. Any other circumstance and she’d be gushing like a schoolgirl. She’s such a huge fan of yours. Reads all your books. I do too.’

Bill clenched his jaw, ‘Really?’

Nodding, Stan said, ‘Guess some part of me remembered that I promised you I would. Or maybe they’re just incredible reads.’

Flattered, Bill said, ‘Thanks, man.’

Studying him, Stan muttered, ‘Not sure about the beard though.’

‘No?’ he chuckled, then flicked his eyes over Stan in return; the darkening hair, the wise but tired eyes, the lean and wiry body.

‘What?’ Stan asked, feeling the discomfort of being watched.

‘Feel like you’d suit one,’ Bill shrugged, not sure what else to say.

Stan puffed his cheeks, 'Well, I don't have my razor with me.'

Bill's nostrils flared, his body tensed. He tried to fight it, but he crumbled, hiding his face in his hand as he wept.

'Hey, hey,' Stan hushed, sliding his arm around Bill's neck, drawing him into a hug. 'It's okay. I'm okay. You're okay.'

Bill clutched at Stan's collar, the faint scent of his aftershave percolating through the wool of his sweater. 'I'm s-sorry,' he managed. 'It's j-j-just a lot.'

Stan sighed, and felt like he exhaled a cloud of darkness with it. 'Yeah. We did it. From here on out, no one knows what happens. It's all going to be different.' That didn't necessarily mean better.

Raising his head, Bill locked Stan's gaze. 'You're right. This,' he smiled, 'this w-was what we needed to change to t-try and save Eddie too, to try and s-set a new path.'

'Yeah,' Stan nodded, as though this was obvious. 'Isn't that why you came to get me?'

Bill shook his head, 'N-no, I d-didn't remember any of that until now. I j-just remembered you.' His voice dropped to a whisper, eyes searching Stan's. 'You were the f-first thing that came b-back to m-me.'

Stan's stomach twisted as he considered closing the gap between their lips, stopped quickly as he saw their overlapping hands, overlapping wedding rings.

The rush of feeling towards Bill was ferocious, surging back into him with unstoppable force, and though most of it was treading old ground, he'd never really thought about kissing him quite like that before, not with such direction and intensity. That was new. He flushed with guilt and embarrassment but didn't break his gaze.

Bill felt like he was hurtling back through time as he sat there with Stan, their bodies connected, lives connected, even souls it seemed sometimes. He thought about the last time they had seen each other, how the thought of kissing Stan had flashed through his brain like a

rocket, but he'd dismissed it as a reflection on how close they were as friends, and how much he was going to miss him.

He didn't feel like he could dismiss it in the same way now, as he felt that same cosmic pull towards him even as adults, as strangers, a pull which he'd felt a few times over the course of his life and now understood. As they held each other, he grew certain that Stan was thinking the same thing. Yet, as he leaned in, Stan pulled back.

Bill was prepared to be humiliated, but Stan's response wasn't disgust or shock or confusion. Instead, he simply said, 'I'm married.'

Gulping, Bill stuttered, 'S-so a-am I.'

Hurried, Stan pushed his lips against Bill's. They melted into each other for a few seconds, before Stan broke into a smile against his face.

'W-what?' Bill asked anxiously.

'The beard scratches,' Stan said honestly, smirking through the blush in his cheeks.

Bill snorted, leaning their foreheads together. 'I've really m-missed you.'

'I've missed you too.'

### **Notes for the Chapter:**

okay so I actually got so invested in Stenbrough while writing this chapter - I've not written Stenbrough properly before so feedback is appreciated !

## 9. Good To See You

### Summary for the Chapter:

The Losers reunite at Jade of the Orient.

Mike waited eagerly at the table in Jade of the Orient, jiggling his right leg and twiddling his thumbs, continually checking the clock. A few minutes early, Bill walked in with Stan in tow.

When Mike saw them both, alive, together, he nearly burst into tears. He drew them both into bear-like hugs which almost suffocated them.

‘I’m sorry for how I was on the phone,’ Stan apologised. ‘Must have freaked you out a bit.’ He was trying to assure himself as much as he was Mike. As soon as they’d hit the Derry borders, the fear had come screaming back into his head. Bill’s presence had been the comfort, his anchor.

Clapping a hand on his shoulder, Mike laughed, ‘You might say that. I’m glad to see you, buddy. Really, really glad.’

‘I can’t b-believe you’ve b-been here all these years,’ Bill shook his head.

‘Not too much longer now,’ Mike vowed.

As Eddie walked in, he was rambling to the waiter about his dietary restrictions, but he was caught off mid-sentence when he saw the other men. ‘Holy fucking shit,’ he said, then grinned happily, bounding across the room to throw his arms around each of them in turn.

‘Eddie, w-what the hell, man?’ Bill swept his eyes over him. ‘You’re looking a-amazing.’

He was. Eddie’s strict diet and exercise regime had done wonders for his skin and tone, even if it wasn’t fun ninety nine percent of the time. His cheeks glowed, the sleeves of his shirt stretched around his biceps.

He gushed, 'Speak for yourself. I like the beard.'

Bill and Stan caught eyes and blushed.

'Mikey, Mikey!' Eddie pummelled his arm. 'God, it's so good to see you.'

'You too, Eddie,' Mike smiled.

When Eddie turned to Stan, he didn't remember quite why he should feel so emotional, but as they embraced, the knowledge that Stan's being there somehow was a joy, a surprise, flooded into and out of him in a relieved sigh. 'I'm really glad you made it, Stan,' he whispered.

'Well, if anyone would be,' Stan said, but Eddie didn't understand, not remembering what he had seen on the kissing bridge that fateful day, not remembering that Stan's presence had potentially lifted the death sentence looming over his neck.

Outside the restaurant, Bev was finishing a cigarette when she spotted a robust, stocky man walking over to her with purpose. 'Ben?' she recognised instantly.

When he saw her, he felt like flowers bloomed in his lungs. 'Beverly Marsh,' he whispered, as though it were the finest poetry he'd ever spoken, then embraced her, finally taller. 'God, you're as beautiful as you ever were.'

She beamed, 'Oh, stop.' Her heart skipped, like a record scratch. She hoped that he couldn't see the remains of the purplish bruise beneath her eye, concealed with makeup and the shadows of her coiffed fringe.

'Handsome Hanscom? Molly Ringwald?' Richie queried, sauntering over. 'My God. We're all so old.'

'It's good to see you too,' Bev snorted sarcastically, then reached for him, kissing his cheek.

Richie hugged Ben, feeling dwarfed even at his height of six foot three. Ben had grown into his body, but that didn't mean he was

lean. His torso was broad, reminiscent of an NFL player or a weightlifting champion, and his belly still stuck out over the lip of his belt.

The three went inside to meet the others. Richie crashed the gong at the far end of the room, and their heads snapped around. Though four sets of eyes shot his direction, Richie only saw one. They hit him like a freight train, rendering him temporarily speechless as Ben and Bev began doing the rounds of hellos.

‘Richie,’ Eddie whispered quietly to himself, then walked over to him. ‘Hey, Trashmouth,’ he said, almost disbelieving, memories cascading into the forefront of his mind like a waterfall, foaming and loud.

‘Hey, Spaghetti,’ Richie said, dragging Eddie into his arms and holding him, closing his eyes, burying his nose in his hair. Love swarmed inside him; such a forgotten feeling. He wallowed in it masochistically.

‘Alright, get off. Other people want to see me too, you know,’ Eddie scolded, pulling away, but he was smirking.

‘If only you were taller; it’d be so much easier to see you if you were in their eyeline,’ Richie mimed looking over his head, then his hand slammed into Bill’s with purpose and vigour. He yanked him into a hug. ‘Big Bill,’ he breathed nostalgically.

‘You look like shit, T-Tozier,’ Bill laughed.

‘How else would you know it was me?’ he shrugged, then announced, beaming, ‘Stan the Man!’

‘You’ve been here about a minute and already it’s ten times louder,’ he complained.

‘It’s a gift.’ He chucked Stan’s chin. ‘Fucking good to see you, man. Really fucking good.’ Then he turned to the group, ‘So what are we waiting for? Let’s get some shots.’

The group clinked their glasses and downed them in near synchronisation. Eddie protested a little, as he didn’t usually drink alcohol, but he felt that he could use some to steady his nerves.

They talked career first. Whilst Richie poked fun at Eddie's job for sounding boring, Eddie asked whether Richie even wrote his own jokes, since he was sometimes actually funny, but Richie proudly declared that he did, and it was true.

Beverly's designs were mostly on the underground circuit but had started to get noticed thanks to her affiliation with a certain Tom Rogan, but it soon became clear that she didn't want to talk about him. Stan didn't much care for accountancy, but he did love to coach Little League, lamenting that he didn't have children of his own to teach the game.

Ben's architecture firm had doubled in size when he'd partnered with Francesca Willoughby. Bill's books had been read by most of the Losers in the room to favourable reviews, even though Richie pretended that he'd only seen the movies because the lead actress was hot.

'That's my w-wife, Richie,' Bill warned.

Richie shrugged, 'Makes her even hotter.'

'Who is married?' Mike asked, genuinely curious, one of the only ones who remembered which of them had been married in the alternate version of the future which had already been made obsolete.

Stan and Bill raised their hands, looked at each other, and lowered them. Richie looked over as Eddie raised his hand too, and his heart wrenched. 'Eddie, you got married?' he queried, laughing in an attempt to squash his urge to vomit yet again.

Eddie braced, 'Yeah, why's that so fucking funny?'

'What? To a woman?' Richie snorted, drawing his beer to his lips, staring at the liquid inside so that he didn't have to look at him anymore.

Resolute, Eddie curled his fingertips into his palms and smacked his lips together. 'Uh, no, actually.' His eyes flicked up at the rest of the group, trying to gauge their reactions, but they were simply

enthralled, not giving much away. 'His name's Eric.'

Richie felt like he'd been punched in the gut. He covered his mouth with his hand as the platitudinous congratulations descended in discordant chorus around him from the other Losers. Feeling Eddie's tension beside him, he jostled against his shoulder. 'One in every group of friends, they say,' he managed. 'Congrats, buddy.'

Eddie flicked his gaze downwards and didn't smile.

'What about you, Trashmouth?' Bill hollered. 'You married?'

Bev shook her head, 'There is no way that Richie is married.'

'I got married,' Richie said indignantly.

Eddie's brow wrinkled, 'You did?'

'Yeah,' Richie assured. 'Me and your mom are very, very happy.'

The group erupted into laughter as Eddie cursed at him, and Richie tried to sustain his grin even as the pain welled inside him like black tar.

As the group returned to Bill and Stan to find out their wives' names, Ben turned to Beverly.

'You didn't get married?' he asked, unsure why some part of him had been sure that she would be.

Beverly shook her head and raised her naked hand, 'Nope. Single. You?' she asked, pursing her lips somewhat hopefully.

'Not married,' Ben admitted. 'Not single. Francesca. We've been together about six years.'

Trying to hide her disappointment, Beverly asked, 'And no ring? Would've expected you to be the wedding type. For the right girl.'

'She,' he wagged his head, 'she didn't want that. Ugly divorce before she met me and kind of lost faith in the concept.'

Bev raised an eyebrow, 'What about what *you* want?'

Their conversation was distracted by Eddie loudly asking Mike whether he was married or not, since he'd posed the question to the rest of the group.

Mike beamed, 'I got a girl. Angela. Angie. Ange,' he rattled off the nicknames. 'My fiancée.' Even though the ring was in its box in his dresser and they hadn't spoken over the past two years, he still thought of Angela as his wife-to-be.

'Where is she tonight?' Stan asked through the hubbub of felicitations. 'Can we meet her?'

He shook his head, 'I don't want her to be dragged into this. You'll all meet her when it's over.'

'When what's over?' Eddie asked.

A dramatic, thick atmosphere descended over the table, and they all suddenly realised that this was no friendly middle school reunion. All but Stan, that was, who'd remembered a good few details earlier. Confused, he asked the table, 'Don't you guys know why you're here?'

Slowly, things filtered out of their mouths like black coffee: names like Pennywise and Betty Ripsom, places like the Neibolt house and the sewers, objects like balloons and spears. No sooner than they did, the table began to erupt around them, spouting hallucinations from the bowl of fortune cookies in a nightmarish fireworks display.

'Eddie! Eddie!' Richie called automatically, reaching out for his elbow and hauling him to his side.

'Richie, what the fuck is happening?' Eddie yelled, clutching at him like muscle memory.

Stan's hand wormed into Bill's, concealed behind them as they sandwiched against one another, backing into a corner of the room.

Ben tried to stand protectively in front of Beverly, but like Mike she was swinging a chair over her head, bashing ferociously at the table

which was swarming with devilish, scuttling creatures like feral, bewitched cockroaches.

‘What the hell are you doing?’ the waitress demanded, swanning into the chaotic scene.

Normality restored, and they asked if they could take their food to go.

---

The group had different modes of transport for getting back to the inn. As Eddie trotted towards his car, he spotted Richie still standing slumped against the restaurant brickwork, smoking.

‘Want a ride?’ he called.

Richie raised an eyebrow, ‘Are you propositioning me already?’

Eddie lowered his eyelids, ‘Get in the car, asshole.’

He did. As they drove, he glowered at the interior. ‘This thing looks brand fucking new, but I’m gonna guess you’ve had it for half a decade.’

Shaking his head, Eddie admitted, ‘Five years, give or take.’ He swallowed, before adding, ‘About how long we were together.’

Richie took his glasses off and cleaned the lenses on the bottom of his shirt. ‘Well, technically, *technically*,’ he enunciated percussively, ‘we never broke up. Gonna tell your husband you’ve actually been cheating on me with him this whole fucking time?’

‘Gonna tell the other Losers that we dated?’ Eddie challenged. ‘You should have seen your face when I told them I was married to a man. I was so fucking embarrassed. I can’t believe,’ he shook his head, choking up, ‘that you’re still as ashamed as you used to be of who we are.’

Sliding his glasses back on with trembling fingers, Richie said, 'I'm not ashamed of you, Eds.'

'You're not out, are you?' Eddie asked, but he wasn't expecting an answer. He knew it already.

'No, but,' Richie stammered, 'I'm not ashamed of you. Of us.'

'Then why did you look so fucking nauseous? It was like you thought you could catch something from me.' His heart splintered.

Richie scoffed, 'That's not what happened. Fucking Christ, I would never think that about you.'

'What *were* you thinking?' Eddie pressed, pulling the handbrake into park.

His face tightened. 'You're married, Eds. Married to some other guy.'

Eddie let his hands slip from the steering wheel, let his head rock back against the seat. He supposed maybe part of him had wished that Richie Tozier had moved on, that he wouldn't care about Eddie in all the same ways that he used to, because that might make it easier to be here with him.

Richie continued, 'I know it's been twenty-seven fucking years but that shit still hurts to hear.'

Eddie softened, saddened. 'I'm sorry,' he said.

'What for?' Richie scoffed, unbuckling. 'Being happy? Don't apologise for that. No. Fuck me, right? I'm the asshole. Like always.' He sighed, 'I just need to grow the fuck up.' Then he hopped out of the car.

As Eddie climbed out of the driver's seat, all he could think was how desperately miserable he was. He tried to think of the last time that he was happy, truly happy. He watched as Richie's dark-curved head flounced towards the door to the inn.

'Rich?'

'What?' Richie span on his heels.

Eddie walked over and slid his arms around Richie's waist, resting his head on Richie's chest. Slowly, he felt Richie's chin sit on his scalp, Richie's arms shroud around his shoulders. 'I'm sorry. I don't know your life. It's not fair of me to judge you for not coming out. I was just getting defensive.'

'Old habits die hard, right?' Richie joked, then said, 'I get it, Eds. Don't worry. I'm sorry I was a jerk at dinner.'

Forever would be too short a time to stay in that embrace. Eddie felt the gap in the conversation where, when they used to argue and subsequently apologise, he would tell Richie he loved him. He had to bite his tongue to keep from saying it. Richie was right: old habits die hard.

Except it didn't feel like habit. Every day with Eric: that was habit. The same old routine day in and day out, no spontaneity or deviation from the structure, no surprises. When he'd been with Richie, every moment had felt so precious, such a daring declaration of love against all odds, a connection so powerful that each kiss could still feel like the first one.

'Think we can start over?' Eddie whispered.

Richie wished that Eddie meant going back in time. He wished he could go back to before the moment where he'd discovered Eddie's marriage so that he could sweep into that restaurant and kiss him without guilt.

He wished he could go back to before they had left Derry and only apply to New York State universities so that he could go to college with Eddie and not forget him. He wished he could go back to that day on the bridge where Eddie had kissed him for the very first time, so he could live those five years together all over again.

'I'd like that.'

He wished they could have every year in between.

## 10. Things Are Different

### Summary for the Chapter:

At the Derry Inn, Ben goes to find Bill to talk about his theories.

Eddie, Mike and Stan tell their share of lies whilst Bev and Richie share a rare honest moment.

Bill was sat on a couch in the Derry Inn foyer, trying to make sense of the situation he was in. He tried to imagine himself as one of the characters in his stories, where he would write it to go next, the quickest route to the happy ending. The fear in his chest was palpable and repetitive, like the stutter which had returned to hang on his lips.

‘Hey,’ Ben greeted, sitting beside him.

‘H-hey.’

‘We’re all here,’ Ben noted. ‘Stan told me that you went to Atlanta. Just had to make sure that he was okay.’

Bill nodded. ‘I th-think his w-wife would have b-broken down the door if I didn’t. But he w-was dealing with the th-thoughts for himself. Guess p-part of him started remembering how to.’

‘What do you mean?’ Ben asked.

‘When we were younger, Stan f-found out what happened to h-him. My fault, actually,’ he remembered suddenly. ‘So, over the next few years, we talked all the time about h-how he was doing, what he was feeling, about n-new therapies and treatments. We used to p-practise meditating and free writing and open circles.’

Ben queried, ‘Open circles?’

Bill smiled as he recalled the concept, gesturing, ‘You s-sit in a group or, for Stan and me it was just the t-two of us, and anything goes. You say whatever is in your h-head and the other people just h-have to listen and n-not comment.’

‘Did it work?’

Looking over at Stan in the other end of the room, talking to Mike and Eddie, Bill said, ‘M-maybe it did.’ He thought about the time they had spent so intensely, so openly, spilling strange secrets and dark thoughts. Accidentally, it helped Bill as much as it helped Stan.

‘Feel like a lot of people in this room might be able to use one, you know,’ Ben said quietly. ‘Everyone’s scared.’

Bill sighed, ‘You got that r-right.’

Ben shifted closer to Bill, lowering his voice so that no one else could hear him. ‘Do you remember that day on the kissing bridge when we saw our future selves?’

His brain crashed like an old operating system. ‘Vaguely. We s-sat down afterwards, and we said we needed to s-save Stan, and if we did, then everything w-would be different.’

Nodding, Ben said, ‘But look at us. There is a lot more that’s different.’

‘Is there?’

‘Maybe you don’t remember as much as me yet,’ Ben hypothesised. ‘Things are different. I’m not thin, for one thing. You have a beard that you didn’t have before.’

Bill frowned, ‘Are those h-huge differences?’

‘Mine is,’ Ben joked, patting his stomach, then conceded, ‘Maybe not, but they are differences nonetheless.’ He debated staying quiet, but added, ‘Bev isn’t married either.’

Raising his head, Bill grasped, ‘N-no, she isn’t.’ He remembered with sudden clarity the last conversation he’d had with Bev alone, where she’d told him that she had been married in both of the visions to an abusive partner. ‘What’s your p-point?’

Ben scoffed, ‘Bill, we’ve completely rewritten the future. Rewritten our lives. This is just what we can see on the surface, but who knows

what else is different in this reality. We might be completely different people to who we were going to be. That's a pretty amazing thing to think.'

Eyeing Stan again, Bill realised, 'Everything we do is in our own hands. Everything we are is d-down to ourselves.'

Ben noticed where Bill was looking. Carefully, he said, 'And each other.'

---

Eddie was sat in the window sill across from Mike, while Stan leaned against the wall beside them. All of them were lying to one another.

Mike was lying about his current living situation with Angela, how he was keeping her distanced from the nightmare of It, how he stopped himself from worrying about her being left on her own. He couldn't bring himself to talk about how she had forgotten him once she had crossed state lines, how she might have fallen for someone else in the time they'd spent apart. Sometimes, he lived so much in the fantasy that he forgot it was a lie.

Eddie was lying about how freeing it was to liberate himself from all guilty pleasures, which was supposed to include watching a certain Trashmouth Tozier's comedy specials which were, to quote Eric, 'beneath him', but Eddie had never managed to kick them. He lied about how grateful he was for his husband's protective, motherly instincts, that he never needed to cook for himself, clean for himself, think for himself. He thought about the diet pills and allergy medications stacked in his briefcase with loathing.

Stan was lying about his marriage to Patty, declaring her the love of his life when realistically, he knew that she wasn't. It wasn't that he didn't love her, but their relationship was more akin to two best friends who lived together, platonic rather than sexual or romantic. Stan just loved *marriage*, loved the commitment of being so devoted

to another person, the idea of a family. Not that he'd been able to have one.

Mike laughed, 'Well, I'm glad your other halves were okay with you coming back.'

Phone turned off and hidden in the glove compartment of his car, Eddie's toes curled as he thought about how furious Eric would be with him for leaving without a word. He'd not texted, not called; he'd just driven away from his life in New York without a moment's consideration. Ran away.

He wondered whether Eric still did the spin class without him. Probably.

Now Eric would probably be pacing the floors of their flat, calling all the local hospitals and doctor surgeries to see if he'd been taken ill, calling all the local taxi companies to see if one had taken a booking in his name, calling Eddie's work to see if he'd been landed an emergency meeting, calling Eddie's friends to see if they'd made plans, calling their favourite restaurants to see if Eddie had a reservation, calling the gym to see if Eddie had gone in for a session, calling their therapist to see if Eddie had an appointment.

After all, that's what he'd done the time that Eddie spontaneously went to a comedy show with a colleague after work once, and the time when someone had dinged his car and they'd had to sort out the insurance claim.

Stan thought about where he'd left his wife whimpering on their bathroom floor as he scarpered off into a frightening and potentially fatal adventure with Bill Denbrough. 'We need to be here,' Stan said matter-of-factly, looking at Eddie. 'I needed to be here.' He had to keep saying it to himself.

'Why are you looking at me like that?' Eddie quizzed.

Mike tried to shoot Stan a look, trying to stop him, but Stan's eyes were locked on Eddie's perplexed face as he whispered, 'You don't remember. How can you not remember?'

Closing his eyes, Mike put a hand on Stan's shoulder, 'I think you're overestimating how much everyone else here knows. Your memory has come back significantly faster.'

As Mike spoke, Eddie wracked his brains, and his stomach twanged in the same way that it had when he'd seen Stan at the dinner table. His spine tingled as the hairs uncoiled on the nape of his neck. 'The vision,' he murmured. 'I was dead. I was going to die. You were too.'

'But I didn't,' Stan stated firmly.

Eddie jumped up and threw his arms around Stan. 'You might have saved my fucking life.'

'Yeah, I know,' Stan rolled his eyes, smiling, trying to seem relaxed. 'Credit where it's due.' Reinforce the idea. Reinforce the positive.

Snickering, Eddie pulled away and lightly punched his arm, 'Overdue.' He felt like the man reprieved, a rope lifting off his neck, the guillotine blade sheathed. 'Thank you.'

Stan shook his head. 'Thank *you*,' he said, 'and you, Mike.' He scanned the room. 'All of you did this, made it possible. I needed all of you and you all came through for me, every time, in your own ways.' He was reminding himself, not them.

Eddie and Mike smiled at each other, and as they did, Stan found himself glancing over at the sofa where Ben was sat with Bill. For a moment, their eyes latched. Stan felt his heart pounding in his chest, like a marching drum for the army going into battle.

'Well, we're not through just yet,' Mike reminded. 'Still a way to go.'

Eddie sighed, 'But at least we're all here. And we know that there is definitely a way to beat It. We've done it before.'

Mike sighed, thinking about the Ritual which too had been done before, without success. 'Yeah,' he agreed, trying to sound optimistic. 'We've done it before.'

---

Richie wandered behind the bar, searching for a bottle of something, anything. He didn't expect to see Beverly sat on the floor behind the counter, clutching an open bottle of whiskey.

'Oh, hey,' Richie greeted. 'Mind if I join you?'

She patted the space beside her, 'Sit.'

He took the bottle from her hands and swigged at it, Adam's apple bobbing as he glugged. As he handed it back, he asked quietly, 'Who gave you the shiner?'

Self-conscious, Bev raised her hand to her eye to cover it. 'You saw that, huh?'

'I've had to cover my own share of bruises with makeup before a show,' Richie huffed. 'I noticed at dinner, but I didn't want to say anything.'

Bev pouted, 'Tom did it. So I dumped him.' She drank, squeezing her eyes shut as the liquor scorched her throat.

'What a fucking asshole,' Richie spat. 'I'll hire someone to take him out. I'm famous; I can do that now.' When Bev didn't laugh, he nudged her shoulder and said, 'You deserve better than that.'

Her face crumpled, 'I know I do. But somehow this keeps happening to me. This is all I can seem to get.'

Richie scoffed, 'Well, that's just not true. Didn't you have a thing with Bill that summer? And, fuck, Ben was so in love with you. Even I had a small crush on you, but I'm a piece of shit, so I'm not one to brag about.'

She smirked, 'You're not *always* a piece of shit. I guess it's just hard. Bill's married to a famous actress now. Ben's dating a business-guru philanthropist.'

Shuffling uncomfortably, Richie thought about the pictures he'd found of Eddie's husband on social media. He was an Adonis: a personal trainer and food columnist. He caught his own reflection in the reflective surface of the fridge opposite. He thought about making another joke, then remembered the last thing that Bev had said to him before she left Derry all those years ago: be honest.

'It's hard coming back and seeing that everyone else has someone but you don't.'

Bev raised her eyebrows, 'I didn't peg you for the relationship type.'

'No one ever does,' he muttered. 'I had a thing for a couple years with this woman, Sandy, but it didn't work out. That's the longest relationship I've been in since,' he stopped, cursing his drunk mouth for running faster than his brain.

'Since when?' Bev pressed, sitting up.

Richie slid both his hands up under his glasses to rub his eyes. 'Fuck,' he mumbled. He swept up the bottle of whiskey and took another hefty gulp of liquid confidence. 'Since Eddie.' He'd never admitted that to anyone before.

Balking, Bev repeated, 'Eddie? You and Eddie? You mean you two were -?'

'Ding, ding, ding!' Richie mimed chiming a bell.

Gawping, she was silent for a while, before she asked, 'How long was it?'

Richie pondered, 'Eh, about six inches,' before Bev slapped his arm. 'From the day you left Derry to the day I left for college.'

'Wow,' she breathed. 'Were you in love with him?'

His chest tightened. 'I think I still am.'

'How? It's been twenty-seven years.' But she knew exactly how. She'd felt so much flood through her when she'd seen Ben's face across the parking lot, when their hands had almost brushed at the table as they

reached for the bread basket, when he'd told her that she was beautiful.

Richie sniffed, 'Because it never ended. I forgot him because of that fucking clown, but I didn't stop loving him. It's like,' he knocked a fist against his sternum, 'there's just been a hole.' He picked up the bottle again, 'And I can't fill it.'

'Fuck, you really must be bummed,' Bev reeled. 'You didn't make a joke about filling holes or anything.'

Chuckling, Richie admitted, 'I thought about it.'

Bev smiled at him, 'Thanks for telling me, Richie. It can't be easy.'

'Oh, I'm easy,' Richie jested, winking. 'So don't try anything, Ringwald.'

'And he's back,' Bev sighed, dropping her head onto his shoulder.

---

After a while, everyone grew tired and gradually lumbered upstairs as Mike made his way back home to his loft, claiming that he was going back to lie beside Angela, but the bed was empty.

Richie took the bottle of whiskey up with him and laid it on the bedside table, periodically swigging, hoping that he could drink himself to sleep, that he could drink enough to forget the evening's events, that he might wake up in the morning and find himself no longer in Derry, or that he might never wake up at all.

Eddie had only his briefcase and gym gear in terms of luggage. He pulled out the slowly coagulating, untouched green smoothie and poured it down the sink. Then he drew out each rattling pill bottle, staring at the contents with loathing and self-pity, thinking about his mother, thinking about Eric, thinking about all the people who'd lied to him.

Bev took her makeup off in the bathroom mirror, revealing the true damage to her face; the yellow and black shimmering around the mauve and scarlet. She remembered how old she was when she'd first applied makeup, how her father had scolded her for using her mother's old supplies, how he'd caressed her pink cheeks with delicate threat.

Ben tugged off his jacket and regarded his reflection in the wardrobe mirror, slapping his hands on his stomach. Then he sat on the edge of his bed, pulling out his phone so that he could call Francesca, rubbing the blank space on his ring finger, wondering what it was he truly wanted. He'd stopped asking himself that question a long time ago.

Bill lay on what would be his side of the double bed, were he sharing it with Audra. A little predictable, she'd said. He imagined instead that Stan was beside him. Just incredible, he'd said. He cursed himself for thinking that way. There were more important things to worry about. He wondered why he was letting himself get so distracted.

Stan bent over the sink in his bathroom, hyperventilating as he stared at his reflection, the snake coiled in his stomach rearing its venomous head. He whipped around as he swore he saw Pennywise's eyes glinting in the shadows behind him, then backed himself into the corner of the bathroom, back sliding down the wall. Alone in the dark, his practised, rehearsed veneer of a self-assured, functional man came toppling down.

'I can't do this,' he gasped to himself, crying. 'I can't do this.'

### **Notes for the Chapter:**

Chapter 10 ! How's that happened ... ?! Thanks to everyone for the support and I'm sorry for all the sad and angst :')

## 11. I Love You

### Summary for the Chapter:

Beverly can't sleep, so she goes to knock on Ben's door.

Eddie needs to get out of his room.

Bev lay awake in her bed, chewing her fingernails down to the skin. The whiskey loitered in her stomach, eking into her bloodstream and muddying her thoughts, delaying her responses. Sleep would be impossible; she was too frightened of what the next few days might entail.

Without thinking, she let herself crawl out of the bed and walked into the hotel corridor. Behind the neighbouring door she knew that she would find Ben. She didn't want to speak to him, she just wanted to be with him.

As she raised her fist to knock, she heard the lightly muffled sounds of Ben's voice as he spoke on the phone.

'Hope I didn't wake you,' Ben said gently.

'I'm still up,' Fran assured, but Beverly couldn't hear her side of the conversation. 'Did you make it okay?'

'Yeah, I did. We'll have to get everyone over for dinner sometime. You'd really like them, I think.'

Outside his hotel room, Bev lowered her hand, no longer convinced that knocking was such a good idea. The gentle tone of his voice, however, was still soothing, even if he was talking to someone else. As she slid her back down the door to sit on the floor, she closed her eyes, and imagined that each word was directed at her.

Fran smiled, clambering onto their bed, cold without Ben's presence in it. 'Who is it you've gone to see?' she queried. 'Did you tell me?'

Ben shook his head. 'Don't think I did. There's Mike, the one who called, then there's Bill, Richie, Eddie, Stan and,' he paused, 'Beverly.'

Bev exhaled as he said her name, humming. It fell off his lips like confetti, flower petals showered with joy. She frowned. Confetti was fleeting; it got thrown away, stuck to the stone slabs outside the church, blown over the gravestones.

‘Seven, eh?’ Fran counted, her head squishing into a pillow. ‘I think I can manage doing a dinner for seven.’

Ben grinned, ‘I’ll help.’

‘Do you miss me?’ Fran asked, giggling.

‘Of course I miss you,’ Ben sighed. ‘I love you.’

Bev remembered the look on his face when he’d said those words to her, all those years ago. She knew how wonderful it was to hear those words from Ben Hanscom’s mouth, how it made you feel like the only person in the world who mattered.

‘I love you too,’ Fran said. ‘I’m sorry that we fought right before you left.’

‘It’s okay. You were right. I don’t think about what I want,’ he admitted. ‘But I think I have some idea now.’

‘Oh yeah?’

Ben breathed deeply. He thought about the other Losers, Bill, Stan and Eddie, raising their hands to indicate that they were married, Richie’s jovial lie that he had wed Eddie’s mother, Mike’s face as he gushed about Angela. He thought about Beverly Marsh raising her blank hand, the assuredness echoing in her voice as she asked him what he wanted.

‘I want to get married,’ Ben said. ‘That’s what I want. I want a wedding.’

Bev sank lower against the door as Fran sat upright. ‘We’ve talked about this,’ she mumbled, her voice grating huskily from it being so late at night.

‘I know,’ Ben nodded. ‘I know *you* have, but you asked me what I

want. When you told me that you didn't want to get married, we should have talked it through properly. I shouldn't have just let it go, because it is something I want. It's something I've always wanted.'

She bit her lip, hearing the ache in his voice even through the speaker of her phone. 'Why?' she asked. 'It's not all it's cracked up to be.'

Ben rubbed his knees. 'You've only been married once. Maybe it'd be different if it was with someone else. If it was with me.'

'Maybe,' she said. 'But it's not just me. I have a lot of friends who married the wrong person. I have a lot of friends who are divorced, sometimes twice. I have a lot of friends who just said that it changed things, made it complicated and suffocating. It can be so messy, Ben. What's wrong with the life we have now? What's so special about a bit of paper?'

'Exactly!' Ben insisted. 'What is so special about it? The paper doesn't change what we already have, but I want all the little things. The little changes.'

'Like what?'

'Like the ring on my finger. The ring on your finger. Calling myself a husband and calling you my wife. The photographs on our wall. Remembering your smile when you saw me at the end of the aisle. Knowing what you look like in that dress.'

Beverly mused, smiling, 'Still such a romantic.'

Fran looked at the photographs currently on their wall: the two of them on the day they partnered their businesses, the two of them skiing in Canada, the two of them on their five-year anniversary dinner date.

'Fran?'

'I'm here.'

Ben readied himself. He wished he was with her, wished that he had a ring, wished that he could see the look in her eyes, but he needed

to know the answer now. 'Will you marry me?'

Fran was silent for a while. Outside the door, Bev pressed her ear to the wood, desperate to know her response. She would be able to tell from Ben's reaction, but he hadn't said another word.

'I love you, Ben,' Fran said eventually, 'but my answer is no.'

'No,' he repeated.

'Sometimes a dress is just a dress,' Fran sighed.

'Idiot,' Bev murmured sadly to herself, and she didn't know who it applied to best: Fran, Ben or herself.

'Can we talk about this when you get back?' Fran asked timidly.

Ben fell back onto the bedcovers. 'Yeah,' he conceded, closing his eyes. 'I need to think.'

Fran's voice quavered, 'I love you so much, Ben. We can work this out.'

'I love you too, Fran,' he said, and hung up.

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Eddie was angry. Having launched each bottle of pills from his window, watching them clatter and shatter onto the concrete below, he didn't know what else to do with his excess fury. He wanted to break something, but he didn't know what.

Hating his surroundings, eyeing the bedsheets with suspicion as to when they were last changed, hating that he didn't even have a normal change of clothes for the morning, let alone pyjamas, considering that should he have a shower, he would have to redress in a sweaty business suit or his cycling shorts, he resolved to get out of his room.

The last thing he expected to see in the hallway was Bev slumped against one of the hotel doors.

‘Hey,’ he said.

‘Hi,’ she said, mildly shocked.

‘What are you doing out here?’

She whispered, ‘Couldn’t sleep. Was going to see if Ben was awake. Someone to talk to, you know.’

‘He’s asleep?’ Eddie asked, sauntering over to her.

Bev shook her head. ‘He’s been on the phone to Fran. I shouldn’t have been listening. Feel like he might need to be alone right now.’

As Eddie reached her, he gasped and dropped to his knees, ‘What the hell happened to your face?’ he asked.

‘Oh my God,’ she spluttered, drawing her palm to her eye. ‘I forgot that I took off,’ she began, stopping as Eddie gently tugged at her hand, trying to see. ‘Don’t worry about it,’ she insisted. ‘It’s not going to happen again.’

‘Let me see.’

‘Really, it’s fine.’

Eddie refuted, ‘It’s not fine. Let me see.’ Reluctantly, Bev lowered her hand so that Eddie could view the bruise in all its tropical colour. ‘I know of a cream that will take that right down,’ he said quietly. ‘I can pick you up some tomorrow morning.’

She nodded, ‘Thanks.’

‘Do you want to talk about it?’ he asked.

‘I spoke to Richie a little about it earlier.’

‘You did?’ Eddie queried. Of all the people for Bev to have spoken to, he wouldn’t have expected Richie.

‘It’s hard,’ she paused. ‘It’s hard feeling like you’re the one who really screwed up your life. Everyone’s famous or married or successful and then my professional life is tied to an ex-boyfriend who is the one man I hate most on this planet outside of,’ she closed her eyes, ‘my father.’

Eddie clenched his jaw. ‘There are more important things than all that surface shit. Look at me. I’ve got a six-figure salary at a job that I fucking hate going to every day and I’m married to a man who acts like,’ he paused, then his eyes widened, ‘my mother.’ He grimaced, ‘Ugh, I’ve never noticed that before.’

‘Then I guess we’re both a little fucked up by our parents,’ Bev said.

‘Who isn’t?’ he joked, then his face softened. ‘Some more than others, I guess.’

Bev hummed her agreement. ‘I think I should go to bed.’

‘Yeah, it’s late,’ Eddie concurred, helping her to her feet.

She stepped to her door, then turned and pointed across the hallway. ‘That’s Richie’s room. In case that’s who you were looking for out here.’

Eddie’s cheeks flushed. ‘Why would I be?’

She leaned against the door jamb, ‘He told me. About you and him, I mean.’

‘He did?’ he asked, surprised, and she nodded. ‘Oh.’

She swiped her key card and opened her door. ‘Goodnight, Eddie.’

‘Goodnight.’

She disappeared.

Behind him, Eddie heard another door open. He turned to see Richie standing there, leaning in the threshold.

‘Were you looking for me or not?’ he asked.

Eddie rocked his head back, 'Oh God. How long have you been listening?'

He raised an eyebrow, 'Long enough, Oedipus.'

'You are so infuriating,' Eddie snarled.

'Are you coming in?'

Hesitating momentarily, knowing it was a potentially dangerous idea, Eddie glanced over at his own door. Then he sighed and walked into Richie's room. He spotted the near empty bottle of whiskey on the bedside table and picked it up.

'Jesus, Richie. How much have you had?' he commented, sniffing at the vapour emanating from the lip.

He grumbled, 'Bev and I shared it.'

'But this was full?'

'I can handle it.' Richie shrugged dismissively, 'What's a guy to do?'

Eddie spluttered, 'Get some help, maybe.' He eyed the brown liquor, the few shots lingering at the bottom, then downed it.

'That's the spirit,' Richie said, clapping him on the shoulder. He slumped on the bed. 'Rough night?'

'Is that a joke?'

'Probably,' Richie admitted. 'You want to sit down?'

He shuffled, 'I'm not sure I should.'

Richie pouted at him, blinking slowly. 'Suit yourself,' he said, and after a few seconds, Eddie eased himself into the space beside him.

'Can I borrow some clothes tomorrow?' Eddie grumbled.

Laughing, Richie quizzed, 'You didn't bring spare clothes?'

Eddie sighed, 'When Mike called, I was driving to work, so I just have

this suit and my gym gear.'

'Wait,' Richie chuckled, 'You just bolted? You didn't go home, didn't pack, didn't make sure that you had every last thing that you could possibly need and then some?'

'Bolted,' Eddie confirmed.

'Fuck,' Richie snorted. 'That's not like you. Well, you're welcome to borrow my clothes but I don't think they'll fit. Might be better off asking someone your own size. Bev, maybe.'

Eddie shoved him, 'Asshole.'

'Come on, then. Why'd you bolt?' Richie asked, propping himself up on his elbows.

Swallowing, Eddie shifted. 'Getting that call was the most stimulating thing that's happened to me in twenty years.'

'Guess Eric isn't much in bed,' Richie smirked.

Offended, Eddie spat, 'Fuck you.'

Richie mumbled, 'He doesn't make you happy, does he?'

'That's none of your business,' Eddie said flatly, refusing to look at him.

'So, no,' Richie inferred. Softly, he whispered, 'Did I make you happy?'

Eddie's lip trembled, 'That's not fair.'

'It's a simple question,' Richie retorted, then softened. 'I'm not trying anything, Eddie. I just -'

'What?'

'I just want to know that I did something fucking right in my life, that I did right by someone. I've fucked up a lot, and most days, I don't like who I am, but I always tried my best with you. You made me

want to.' He exhaled heavily, 'So it pisses me off that someone else doesn't and worse, that you're accepting that.'

Allowing himself to look at Richie, their eyes locked, and Eddie's heart felt like it was being torn out of his chest. 'You made me happy, Richie,' he promised. 'That was the happiest I've ever been.'

'Then what happened?' Richie pressed. 'How'd you end up with him?'

'Think I forgot what happiness felt like. Just like I forgot everything else.'

Richie chewed the inside of his cheek. 'Think I might have too.'

Eddie looked at the empty bottle of whiskey. 'Seems like it.'

'Do you think,' Richie mused, 'if we didn't forget like we did, that maybe we -?'

'Don't,' Eddie cut him off, getting up. 'Please don't.' He started to walk to the door.

'Why not?' Richie asked, following him.

He turned back to face him, 'Because it's too hard, Richie. It's way too fucking hard.'

'What is?' Richie asked.

Eddie spluttered, 'Seeing you. Knowing that you're not happy. Knowing how much danger you and I are in just by being in this fucking town. In all the futures we've seen, I die over the next few days.'

Richie winced at the memory he'd erased as Eddie went on, 'It's so much already. And I love you too much to think about what might have been if it wasn't for that fucking clown.'

Richie stepped closer to him, 'What the fuck did you just say?'

'Fucking clown,' Eddie repeated, his voice trembling.

‘You said you love me,’ Richie breathed.

Eddie bit his lip. ‘Fuck,’ he muttered. ‘I did.’

‘You still love me?’ Richie blurted, clapping his hands on each of Eddie’s cheeks.

‘Richie,’ Eddie begged.

‘Do you?’

With resign, Eddie wrapped his fingers around Richie’s forearms. ‘Of course I do. I’ve always loved you.’

Richie kissed him, slamming their bodies up against the door as he did so, thumbs tracing along the curve of Eddie’s jaw. Eddie let his arms slip around Richie’s waist, pulling him closer, then started to tug upwards on the cotton of Richie’s shirt.

Without hesitation, Richie pulled at the collar on the nape of his neck and dragged his shirt off over his head. Dark curls fell in disarray over his forehead, dark curls spread across the breadth of his chest and down from his bellybutton.

Eddie started to unbutton his own shirt, fingers fumbling with excited trepidation, until he grew so impatient that he was tempted to tear it off, but finally he managed, shrugging the sleeves onto the floor.

‘Oh for fuck’s sake,’ Richie commented, hands dragging down Eddie’s chiselled abdomen. ‘It is not fair that you look like this.’

‘Well, don’t get too used to it because I’m quitting my fucking diet,’ Eddie laughed, then kissed him again, relishing the coarseness of Richie’s stubble against his chin, the heat of Richie’s chest pressed flush against his own. Quickly, his hands were dexterously unbuckling Richie’s belt.

Richie saw the flash of gold on Eddie’s ring finger and grabbed for his wrist, pulling it up to hover between their two faces. ‘What about this?’ he asked, terrified of the answer.

Eddie gulped, eyes switching focus back and forth between the ring

and Richie's magnetic eyes. He released his hand from Richie's grip without a word, without a smile, and Richie's heart began to fracture like crystal, until he saw Eddie's other hand reaching for the gold band. With a twist, he squeezed it off his finger and tucked it into Richie's palm.

'Are you sure?' Richie stammered, feeling as though he held the weight of the earth.

Eddie nodded, 'I'm sure. It's you, Rich.'

They kissed again, heated and beautiful, falling into, floating through and finding one another. Richie let the ring fall to the floor, where it rolled across the carpet in an arc before collapsing to a halt. Without it, Eddie felt free; wonderfully, extraordinarily free. He'd made a choice for himself for the first time in his adult life, and his choice was Richie. He would always choose Richie.

Spurred, Richie hooked his fingers into Eddie's belt loops and dragged him over to the bed, sitting Eddie down as he shimmied off his jeans and climbed on top of him. His fingers squeezed at the toned flesh of Eddie's waist as he bit at Eddie's neck.

Between gasps, Eddie popped the button on his trousers and awkwardly pulled them down, then hitched his knee between Richie's thighs to haul him closer. Richie growled and pushed their lips together once more, grinding his hips down until he heard Eddie moan.

'Fuck, I've missed this,' Richie gushed, sliding down Eddie's body, pulling down his underwear as he went.

'Beep beep, Richie,' Eddie rasped. 'Seem to remember that trashmouth of yours can be put to better use.'

Richie grinned and did as he was told. Eddie keened as his fingers raked through Richie's hair, hips occasionally bucking even as Richie gripped his thighs to hold him down.

'Think you might be the one who needs to keep quiet,' Richie teased, removing his boxers and clambering back up Eddie's frame, dotting

kisses as he went. He raised his eyebrow suggestively, 'Want me to get a -?'

Eddie nodded, and Richie leaned for his wallet. He went to tear it open with his teeth. Eddie snorted, pushing on Richie's shoulders to rotate their position. 'Sure. Like you're going on top,' he sniggered, yanking it from Richie's hand.

'Fuck me,' Richie chuckled, eyes widening as he stared at Eddie above him, disbelieving and hopelessly in love.

'Planning on it,' Eddie assured, kissing him passionately.

As their lips parted, Richie said, 'I love you, Eds. I don't think I said it before, but I do. I really fucking do.'

Eddie smiled and kissed him softly, 'I know, asshole. And don't call me Eds.'

## 12. Listening

### Summary for the Chapter:

Unable to sleep, Bill sets out into the hallway and finds a similarly restless Beverly.  
Stan debates running away.  
Ben takes a moment to himself.

Pyjama-clad, Bill stepped out of his room, having been disturbed by the excessive noise from one neighbouring his, perplexed as he couldn't fathom quite who was in there. As he went into the hallway, another door squeezed ajar. Bill could see half of Bev's face in the gap. He didn't know why she was hiding the other half.

'Hey,' he said, his eyes wide.

'Hi,' she said, smirking, her eye flicking towards the door from where the noises were originating.

'W-wait,' Bill said, pointing at her. 'You're not in there.'

Bev laughed and shook her head, 'Nope. That's not me.'

Bill covered his mouth with his hand as he tried to wrap his brain around the fact that two of his male friends were currently hooking up. He tried to figure it out, 'M-Mike's not here. It's not y-you. It's not m-me. Eddie's m-married. Stan's m-m-,' he nearly said *mine*, but managed to switch to 'married. And B-Ben's with Francesca. So, that j-just leaves Richie. Richie on h-his own.'

Humming at a high pitch, Bev countered, 'I don't think he's on his own.'

'Then it's Eddie,' Bill decided. 'It h-has to be.' He scratched his neck. 'Fuck m-me. Richie and Eddie?'

Bev nodded, 'Yup.'

'Richie's gay?' Bill asked, myriad questions and thoughts sweeping through his mind at once as he considered this idea. He'd had the

same reaction earlier when Eddie had revealed that he had a husband. It was only magnified as another of his friends seemed to have either actively concealed his sexuality from Bill or realised it in the interim years.

Bev wrinkled her nose, 'Not sure if he's gay, but he's not straight. And *that*,' she pointed at the loud room, 'is him with Eddie.'

'Do you know f-for sure?' Bill queried suspiciously.

'I know everything,' Bev rolled her eyes.

'N-no, you don't,' Bill scoffed automatically.

Bev narrowed her gaze, 'What don't I know?'

'N-nothing. M-messing with you,' Bill backtracked. 'Richie and Eddie,' he said again, memories of the two of them bickering as teenagers running rife. 'I don't know if I'm s-surprised.'

'I was,' Bev said, 'but I wasn't around when they were together, I suppose.'

Bill put his hands up, 'W-what? W-when were they t-together?'

'They didn't tell you.'

'When they w-were here? When w-we were kids?' Bill rattled.

Nodding, Bev said, 'Guess it's all come back.' She knew how that felt.

Bill knew how that felt too. For a moment, his mind drifted and he wondered what might have happened if he'd knocked on Stan's door in the middle of the night. 'Eddie's m-married,' Bill said, but he was saying it for his own sake.

'The heart wants what it wants,' Bev shrugged.

'I guess s-so,' Bill blinked. 'But *I* want to s-sleep.'

She snickered, 'Good luck with that.' She tapped her fingernails on her doorframe, moving to close it. 'Night, Bill.'

‘Night, Bev.’

Bill considered returning to his room and trying to sleep but, like a rope had been lassoed around his waist and sharply tugged, he found himself wandering down to the other end of the corridor to where he knew Stan was staying. With the ghost of a smirk on his lips, he raised his hand to knock, but before he could, the door opened.

‘Bill,’ Stan gulped, stepping backwards. His eyes were wide and frantic, bloodshot and red. Transparent paths bled down each of his blotched cheeks. In his arms, he clutched the duffle bag of his possessions, and though he was wearing pyjamas, there were shoes on his feet.

‘Going s-somewhere?’ Bill asked, weighted.

Stan crumpled and began to ramble, vanishing into the cycle of panic, ‘I’m sorry, Billy. I can’t. I can’t do it. I can’t be here. I need to leave. I’m sorry, I’m sorry. I don’t want to let you down, but I’m leaving.’

Bill stepped into the room and closed the door behind them. He reached for Stan’s shoulders and squeezed, his thumbs massaging into the hollows below Stan’s collarbone. ‘Whoa, c-calm. It’s okay. It’s okay, I’m h-here.’

‘No, Bill, I need to go. Now. You can’t stop me,’ he vowed, but the shaking in his arms betrayed the fragility of this sentiment.

Carefully, Bill said, ‘I’m not s-stopping you, okay? I j-just w-want you to take a m-minute and b-breathe. T-talk to m-me. W-what’s going on?’

Stan frowned, his gaze skipping locations, unable to rest for too long on any one thing; blurred and dissociated. ‘I can’t, Bill. I don’t want you to hear it all and I don’t want you to make me stay.’

Swallowing, Bill suggested, ‘If you don’t w-want me to say anything, I w-won’t. Just g-get it out of yourself. It h-helps, sometimes. R-remember?’

His chest heaving, Stan whispered, ‘Open circle. I remember the open

circle.'

'Yeah,' Bill breathed gently, 'Yeah. So let's s-sit, okay? Let's get some m-more lights on and we can s-sit on the floor or on the b-b-bed, whatever you w-want, and we'll talk.'

Stan nodded, lowering the duffle bag to the floor as Bill leaned for the light switches, illuminating them in an orange glow. He let Bill's hand on his back guide him into the centre of the room, but it was Stan's decision to kick off his shoes and climb onto the bed, crossing his legs underneath him. It felt safer up there somehow, like when kids are little and fear the monster under the mattress.

Already, Stan's breathing was steadying, still audible but more regular, deeper. His hands cupped his kneecaps, rubbing ritualistically. His gaze zoned, locking in on Bill folding his own legs underneath himself opposite.

'Listening,' Bill said quietly. His spine itched with fear, but he tried to keep his demeanour calm.

'I'm scared, Billy,' Stan said. 'I'm really fucking scared. I keep thinking that It's right behind me. It's under my skin. It's like I can feel It crawling around in there, like It's in my blood, and I just want to get it out of me. And it makes me want to –' he stopped, biting his lip.

Bill ached to offer some comfort. Instead he just repeated, 'Listening.'

Stan's face contorted, 'It makes me want to hurt myself just so there'd be some way for It to leach out of me. I feel like I'm poisoned, or something. My head is just so dark and confused right now, like it's been pumped full of smoke and all I can see are its eyes.'

Bill moved his hand from his lap to the bedcover, in case Stan wanted to take it. He did, exhaling.

'Do you want to talk?' Stan asked.

'W-would that h-help?' Bill shifted.

Stan nodded. 'Yeah, I think so.' He flashed his eyes up at him.

‘Listening.’

‘Okay,’ Bill sighed. ‘I’m s-scared. I think I’m s-so s-scared that my b-brain is f-flooding with other things to th-think about b-b-because if I think t-too m-m-much about w-where I am or w-what w-w-we’re going to f-face then I’ll lose it.’ He paused. ‘Listening.’

Biting his lip again, Stan said, ‘Part of me thinks I was supposed to die in that bathtub.’

Bill knew he wasn’t supposed to comment, but he couldn’t help murmuring, ‘Fuck,’ as the tears cascaded down his face.

Heart breaking for him, Stan squeezed his hand. ‘I couldn’t do it. When I was in that moment, I couldn’t do it. I wanted to break the cycle, I wanted to give Eddie some hope, I wanted to save Patty from finding me and you from blaming yourself and I wanted to know that I was strong enough to beat It. But now that I’m here, the cycle is broken, Eddie has hope, Patty won’t find me. And I’m *not* strong enough to beat It. I can’t face It. The only reason I’m still here is you.’

Squeezing his eyes to stop himself from asking what he wanted to ask, Bill said through gritted teeth, ‘Listening.’

Stan’s eyebrows knitted, like he was in physical pain. ‘I remember those drawings you made all those years ago. I remember the looks on your face and the conversations we had. I know how badly you needed to know that I would be safe, that you’d saved me. If I didn’t make it here, you would have blamed yourself. You’d think you’d failed me somehow. And I’d think I’d failed you.’ He sighed. ‘Listening.’

Bill groaned, ‘I c-can kill It. I know I c-can kill It, because I’ve seen it b-before and I know I do, and p-part of me h-has to, for what It’s taken from m-m-me and what It’s taken f-from so m-many others, and for what I w-won’t let It take from anyone else. But if It took you,’ he choked, ‘If It t-took you, then I can kill It, but I can’t b-beat It. It’ll already have w-w-won.’ He managed, ‘Listening.’

‘I don’t know how much of what I’m thinking is me. I don’t know what’s real and what’s not, and I don’t know whether that even

matters. I don't know what I remember and what I've forgotten. I don't know if,' he struggled, 'if I'm It now. I feel It so much that I don't know where I stop and It starts, if I'm even in here anymore, and if I'm not, then I need to get the fuck out of here so that no one gets hurt because of me.'

'Listening,' Bill whimpered.

'Stop,' Stan requested softly, bringing his other hand to Bill's cheek. 'Stop listening. Talk to me properly. Tell me,' he begged, 'Tell me if I'm me. You know me better than anyone. Am I still fucking here?'

Bill searched his dark eyes, honestly, trying to see any malicious flash, any falseness, anything which struck him with fear, but he couldn't find it. Even though Bill was worried for Stan, he trusted those eyes with every inch of his body, every beat in his heart.

'I think y-you are,' he said quietly. 'You w-wouldn't ask me if you w-weren't. You w-wouldn't be so w-w-worried about m-making sure everyone else is s-safe, like y-you always are.'

Stan's eyelashes were slicked silver as he drew Bill into a hug. 'I'm just so scared, Bill. More scared than I ever was as a kid. When you're a kid, there's a Santa Claus and a Tooth Fairy and a Bogeyman and you can believe in all that fantasy, and you can believe there's a way out.'

'There is a w-way out,' Bill assured. 'And t-t-twisted as it is, the only w-w-way out is h-here. In D-Derry. With each other.'

Stan sniffed, resting his cheekbone on Bill's shoulder, rising and falling with each of Bill's breaths. He closed his eyes. 'I do feel,' he started, 'I do feel more like myself around you. Like,' he sighed, 'like you can bring me out of that place. It's like I'm down that fucking well in that house and,' he inhaled raggedly, 'and it's dark and loud but then I just see you or hear your voice and,' he relaxed, 'I think it might be okay.'

Bill's hands spread across Stan's back as he held him tighter still. 'But that's h-how you make m-me feel too,' he said. 'You're not alone in f-f-feeling that way. I know the others are s-scared too, but it's h-how

we look at each other and s-s-see how much w-we're f-f-fighting for, how m-much we've been m-missing for all these years. Maybe that's the m-main thing we're f-f-forgetting: just h-how much we all n-need each other.'

'Which is why It has kept us apart,' Stan agreed.

'That's what It w-wants,' Bill nodded, stroking Stan's hair until he lifted his head, catching his eyes. 'It knows w-we're s-stronger together.'

Stan smacked his lips together, 'I need to stay.'

Relieved, Bill smiled through his sigh and smudged away the tearstains on Stan's face. 'I'm r-really glad to h-hear you s-s-say that.'

He shrugged his shoulders up slightly, 'Would you sleep here with me tonight?'

'I was g-going to s-suggest the same thing.'

Stan smiled, and Bill could not have been happier to see that expression on his face. They pulled back the duvet cover and manoeuvred beneath it. The sheets were cold and crisp, and they shuddered, huddling together.

Bill let his arm drape over Stan to pull him close enough that Stan could feel the heat of his skin. Their faces lingered only millimetres from each other's, and they stared, Stan finding his focus, like a tunnel, like Bill's face was the circle of light at the top of a well.

'Goodnight,' Bill whispered. 'J-just w-w-wake me, if you n-need me.'

Stan nodded, 'I will.' He let his eyes shut as he settled into Bill's calming embrace. 'Goodnight.'

---

Ben was in the shower. He'd been in the shower for a while, letting the hiss and spit of the water against the tiles and the plastic of the drain drown out the voices in other rooms of the hotel, in the hallway, in his head.

At first, he had cried, buckets, the shower head hammering against his face so that the tears blurred away, palms pressed up against the wall to stop him from crumbling to his knees. Now, he was sat in the steady stream, letting his hair stick flat against his forehead, his fingers and toes pruning, as he washed himself stoically again and again.

He knew why he never asked himself what he wanted. It was because it never seemed to be the same as what someone else wanted. Fran wanted to partner their businesses. He didn't, but he didn't want to jeopardise their new relationship. He partnered his business. Fran wanted to go skiing on holiday. He didn't, but he knew how much she loved it. They went skiing every year. Fran didn't want to get married. He did, but he didn't tell her so. They didn't get married.

As a kid, it had all been the same. Beverly Marsh wanted Bill Denbrough to like her, and Bill Denbrough wanted Beverly Marsh to like him. Ben had let himself believe that it didn't matter what he wanted. Even when he finally confessed his feelings to her, he wasn't considering what he really wanted. He'd told her not to say it back.

He knew how it felt to not have your wants fulfilled, so he desperately tried to please everyone else around him. Somehow, nobody ever noticed that Ben didn't ask for anything that he wanted, until Fran the night he left for Derry.

It had taken her six years to reach that point, to realise that she didn't know what his wants truly were, that in some way, she didn't really know him at all if she didn't know what drove him forward, what his life was all about, what he was thinking.

It had taken Beverly about six minutes. They'd been apart for twenty-seven years, and at that dinner table, she'd posed the same question that Fran asked him just a few hours earlier: 'What about what you want?'

And he'd listened to her. Without question or respite. He'd picked up the phone and he'd called Francesca Willoughby and asked her to be his wife, because that was what he wanted. He never did that; he never put himself first, never had the strength to do so, because he always thought that hearing nothing was better than hearing no.

Ben turned off the shower. He got up and dried himself with the towel. He left the bathroom.

Finally, it was quiet in the inn. He climbed into bed, and he slept.

## 13. Second Chance

### Summary for the Chapter:

Eddie wakes up beside Richie.

Stan wakes up beside Bill.

As the new day filtered through the thin curtains, Eddie's eyes flickered open. He was still in Derry, at the Derry inn, which was terrifying. A clown hadn't murdered him in his sleep, which was a pleasant surprise. He was in Richie's bed, with Richie's arms wrapped around him, Richie's breath skittering over his neck as he snored. Somehow both terrifying and a pleasant surprise.

He tried to squeeze out of Richie's embrace to go to the bathroom but was met with a disgruntled noise from deep in Richie's throat.

'Where are you going?' Richie mumbled.

The hairs on Eddie's neck stood erect at hearing Richie's husky, sleepy voice. 'Nowhere,' he said, shifting backwards slightly so that his back pressed flush against Richie's chest.

Richie hummed happily, 'Good.' Dotting kisses down the slope of Eddie's shoulder, he said, 'Last night was fun.'

'Shocked you can remember after all that whiskey,' Eddie commented.

'How could I not remember?' Richie growled low, bringing his head round to bite at the tendon in Eddie's neck, his hand running down Eddie's arm until he could weave their fingers together, unobstructed by a wedding ring.

Whimpering at Richie's touch, Eddie said, 'It was pretty great.' Then he shifted to roll onto his other side and face Richie. At first, he was smiling, then he recoiled, 'Oh, fuck. Your breath.'

Richie laughed, 'Yours is not much better.' He leaned for his bag and pulled out a tin of mints, popped one into his mouth and offered one to Eddie.

‘That’s disgusting,’ Eddie wrinkled his nose.

Scowling, Richie said, ‘I’ll brush my teeth in a minute. I just don’t want to get up just yet. You’re the one without a toothbrush.’

Taking the mint, reminded of the pills he wouldn’t be swallowing this morning, Eddie whined, ‘Oh, fuck. I don’t have a toothbrush.’

‘You can borrow mine if you want,’ Richie grinned, knowing just how much Eddie would hate the suggestion.

Eddie blinked, ‘Are you trying to make me throw up?’

Snorting with laughter, Richie leaned to kiss him, and Eddie eagerly accepted. Richie beamed, ‘God, I swear if I’d known this would happen, I’d have prayed for this fucking clown to show up early.’

‘Five years ago and I wouldn’t have had a divorce to sort out,’ Eddie muttered.

Richie stared, ‘You’ve been married for five years?’

Huffing, Eddie said, ‘Well that’s when the laws changed. We had a domestic partnership before that for about eight years, but a dissolution is a lot simpler than a divorce.’

‘Eddie,’ Richie snapped, ‘Are you telling me you’ve been married for *thirteen* years?’

‘A domestic partnership isn’t a marriage,’ Eddie said.

‘I’m not arguing the fucking semantics,’ Richie shook his head. ‘When did you meet this guy?’

Eddie babbled, concerned by the expression on Richie’s face, ‘My first year at Columbia, but we didn’t get together until my third year.’

‘Fucking hell, Eds,’ Richie spluttered, raking his hand through his hair. ‘You’ve been with him twenty-odd years? That’s,’ he leaned backwards to lie flat, ‘That’s fucking insane. And you took that ring off like it was fucking nothing.’

‘Yeah,’ Eddie nodded. ‘Yeah, I did, because I love *you*.’

Runnels ran across Richie’s forehead, ‘But, fuck, after twenty years you’d probably have had enough of me too.’

Eddie clambered on top of him and clamped his face in his hands. ‘Richie, you’ve said a lot of stupid shit over the years but that is the single fucking stupidest thing I have ever heard come out of your fucking trashmouth.’ He kissed him. ‘It’s already *been* twenty years and I’ve not nearly had enough of you.’

‘We haven’t been together through that time.’

‘Found you anyway,’ Eddie said. ‘You don’t think I’ve seen every one of your shows? I *bought* them on fucking DVD.’

‘No one buys DVDs anymore,’ Richie muttered, smiling, ‘You should get with the times.’

‘And Eric hated your material so those DVDs are hidden in my office like fucking pornos,’ Eddie laughed.

Richie scoffed, ‘What do you mean *like* pornos? You’ve heard my material.’

Eddie shook his head. ‘I didn’t even know why I liked them so much, why I liked you so much. I watched you do interviews, I even,’ he groaned, ‘fuck, I was *not* going to tell you this, but I even saw a show live once.’

‘What?’ Richie spluttered.

‘It must have been six or seven years ago, when you came to New York and played –’

‘Camino’s,’ Richie finished quietly. ‘That was a terrible fucking gig.’

‘You were awful,’ Eddie said honestly.

Richie gripped his shoulders, ‘I can’t believe you were there. Fuck, we were in the same fucking room.’ His face twisted, not sure if he loved or hated this information.

Eddie thought back to that night. He'd not told Eric that he was going out to see the show, and Eric had gone into a frenzied panic in Eddie's absence. When Eddie finally returned home, Eric was furious.

'I wish I'd seen you. I wish we'd met,' Richie said quietly. 'Maybe we would have remembered each other.'

'Wouldn't have mattered if we remembered or not,' Eddie chuckled.

Richie sighed, 'Because you were with Eric either way.'

'No,' Eddie refuted, 'Because if I'd remembered you, then we know exactly what would have happened, because that's where we are right now. And if I didn't remember you, then I'd just have fallen in love with you all over again.'

Richie pulled him down into a deep kiss. 'You're really fucked when it comes to me, aren't you?' he said incredulously.

'So fucked,' Eddie admitted. 'And I know you're just as bad.'

Trilling his lips, Richie said, 'Worse, I think.'

'No,' Eddie insisted, kissing his cheek. 'We are exactly as bad as each other. We always have been.'

Part of Richie had always believed that he loved Eddie more than Eddie loved him, simply because he couldn't fathom anybody loving him with the same kind of unconditional ferocity that he felt for Eddie. He certainly didn't expect it. It seemed unreasonable.

When they were kids, he'd known that Eddie loved him, but he'd always thought that one day Eddie would figure out that he was too good for him, once the world opened up and he was provided with more options than the only other boy who he knew liked boys in his vicinity.

'I can't believe you're talking about divorcing someone for me,' Richie prattled. 'So adult of us.'

Eddie rolled his eyes, 'I'm not *talking* about divorcing him. I *am* divorcing him. And I think we established last night that divorcing

him would be a good decision in its own right.'

Richie couldn't stop himself from quipping, 'Motherfucker.'

Eddie hit him and shook his head, laughing. 'But no matter who I'd married, they wouldn't be you. No one else even compares to you, Rich. You're the fucking love of my life.'

Richie kissed him, drawing his body so close to his own that he felt like they were one person, and he felt the hole in his chest finally close. 'I love you so fucking much,' Richie breathed into Eddie's mouth.

Eddie smiled, 'I love you too. Now brush your fucking teeth.'

---

'Morning,' Stan whispered as Bill opened his eyes.

'Morning,' Bill groaned huskily, but he was overjoyed to see that Stan was still lying beside him in his arms, safe. 'How d-did you s-sleep?'

Stan smiled, 'Pretty well. In the end. You?'

'Pretty well,' Bill agreed, now very aware of their physical contact, their closeness to one another, their legs which had intertwined as they slept. 'How are you f-feeling?'

Stan sighed, 'Better. Much better.'

Bill smiled, 'Good.' He believed him. He could see the colour in his cheeks again, the light shimmering in his eyes, eyes that last night had looked tired, deep and mysterious, lost and clouded, but in this moment looked bright, alert, present.

'Thank you for last night,' Stan said. 'I don't know what happened. As soon as I was alone, I just fell down the rabbit hole.'

Bill nodded, 'It's o-okay. You're still h-here. You f-f-fought through it. I knew you c-could.'

'You made me believe I could,' Stan sighed.

'You had to let yourself b-believe it though,' Bill reminded. 'That's the h-hard p-p-part.'

Stan smiled at him. The look in Bill's eyes was so hopeful, so completely faithful and generous. He knew that Bill cared for him so innately, like it was part of his core. Affection prickled inside him, as his gaze slipped to Bill's lips.

'Bill?'

'Yeah?'

'The plane,' he said cryptically, but Bill knew what he meant. 'What was that?'

His heart throbbing in his chest, Bill wasn't sure why Stan had chosen this moment to ask. He didn't say anything.

Almost inaudibly, Stan promised, 'Listening.'

Bill swallowed and paused, unsure if he should tell the truth. On the other hand, the last thing he felt capable of doing was lying to him.

'That was s-something I w-wanted to do when we w-were kids,' Bill admitted, 'and s-something I really regretted n-not doing. So when you w-were right there, after all that t-t-time, I didn't w-want to regret n-not doing it all over again.' Breath skating through his parted lips, he broke the rules of the open circle to ask, 'You?'

Stan's throat constricted. 'Same.' His voice cracked, 'Figured I owed it to the teenage version of me that didn't really understand how he felt about you until you were leaving.'

'I don't th-think I let m-myself think that w-way, b-back then,' Bill said sadly. 'Small town th-thinking. I n-never even considered that I w-would feel that way, that I c-could f-f-feel that way.'

Stan shook his head, thinking about Richie and Eddie, how they had managed to come to terms with the way they felt for each other at such a young age, how they'd been able to live in their private bubble, only daring to share it with Stan in implication and inference.

Bill was thinking about Richie and Eddie too, wishing he had known about their relationship, thinking that maybe if he had, then he might have acknowledged his feelings for Stan earlier, that they might have had some time.

With a sigh, Stan brushed his nose against Bill's. 'I'm glad that we got the second chance.'

M-me too,' Bill agreed, even if the questions were gnawing away at him, as Audra and Stan both swirled in his mind. Instinctively, his grip tightened on Stan's waist, begging himself not to submit to the moment, not while they were both married, not while Stan was in such a vulnerable place, not while he himself was so confused and terrified.

Stan grazed his hand up Bill's arm, dragging his toes up Bill's shin. 'Bill?' he whispered.

Bill let out a couple of small huffs. 'Y-y-you h-had a t-t-tough n-night.'

'Bill,' Stan said, no longer a question, but a name crumbling beautifully off his lips as his hand reached Bill's neck. He could feel the quickening pulse beneath his fingers.

Stuttering, Bill said, 'W-we c-c-can't. W-w-we h-have w-w-wives.'

'Didn't stop you before,' Stan pouted.

Bill swallowed, 'Y-you w-w-were always the s-sensible, r-rational one. I w-w-was the impulsive, r-reckless one g-getting us into t-trouble.'

'So what's changed?'

'Nothing,' Bill said, then brushed his lips softly against Stan's. As they broke apart, he stammered, 'Th-that's the p-p-problem.'

Stan slid his hand round to the nape of Bill's neck so that he could

draw his head closer, bring their lips together once more, slowly, almost painfully slowly. He didn't feel all that guilty. He suspected that he might lose his life within the next few days at the hands of It, so if he wanted to kiss Bill Denbrough, then he would.

If he survived, then he would cross that bridge when he came to it. As far as he was concerned, if he'd forgotten everything about Derry for the past two decades, then it was highly possible they would forget again once they left. If they didn't, then maybe they could pretend instead.

Nevertheless, right now he was in a pocket of his own history, reliving the past and temporarily rewriting the present, a life that he perhaps might have led, a love that he perhaps might have explored. It was worth it, to get to do that even once. Not many people got those kinds of opportunities.

Their lips parted, momentarily, before they both chased another few quick pecks, not quite ready to let each other go. Then Bill pulled away and laid on his back. Underneath the sheets, he fiddled with his wedding ring. He thought about Stan lying beside him, Eddie laying with Richie in another room, and wondered if they felt the same guilty ambivalence that he did.

'I'm g-g-gonna h-have a shower,' Bill announced, climbing out of the bed.

'Alright,' Stan nodded, climbing out himself. He walked around the bed to catch Bill on his way to the bathroom, stopping him with a hand on his chest. 'Are you okay?'

Bill shook his head, 'I d-don't know w-what to d-do.'

Stan said quietly, 'You don't have to do anything right now. We are in a very weird, scary situation. Until we're out of it, don't break yourself trying to solve things.' He lowered his voice, 'There might not be anything to solve.'

'W-what d-do you m-mean?'

Smiling sadly, Stan said steadily, 'We're here, alive, today,

remembering. That might change.'

Bill shook his head, 'D-don't s-s-say th-that.'

Stan stepped closer and kissed him, growing more accustomed to the way Bill's beard grazed against his skin, to how broad his hands were, to his short hair and flat chest. The only man he had ever kissed.

'Have your shower, okay?'

Bill nodded and went into the bathroom. As the door closed between them, Stan felt a chill on his neck. He knew that Bill was right there, only a few feet away, and yet he felt alone. Fear rose up inside him, as though it might appear at any moment, crawling out of the minibar or taunting him from one of the picture frames on the wall.

'Get it together,' he murmured under his breath to himself. 'You can do this. You can do this.'

Bill reopened the bathroom door, 'You o-okay?' he asked. 'Thought I heard something.'

Stan looked at him and breathed deeply. 'I'm fine.' He smiled, stomach settling. 'I'm fine.'

### **Notes for the Chapter:**

Whoops they're all being gay together look how that happened...

## 14. How Are You

### Summary for the Chapter:

Bev and Ben chat out of the window.  
Eddie ruminates on his relationships.  
Bill approaches Richie about his sexuality.

Bev needed a cigarette. She'd painstakingly reapplied her makeup to her face, thinking on the events of the previous evening, then pushed open the windows of her room as wide as they could go, leaning out over the railings.

'Hey,' came a voice to her right, and she jumped.

'Fuck!' she said, clutching her chest, cigarette dangling from her lips. 'You frightened the life out of me.'

Ben grimaced, 'Sorry.' He was leaning out of his own neighbouring window, wanting to indulge in the fresh morning air, wondering what it meant for his relationship with Francesca that she had declined his offer of marriage.

'How was your night?' Bev asked, as nonchalantly as she could muster, as though she hadn't eavesdropped.

Shrugging, Ben said, 'I've had better ones.' Pursing his lips, he said, 'Sounded like you had a good time.'

Bev sighed, lighting the cigarette, 'Why does everyone assume that was me?'

'Well, because you're the only,' Ben explained, then stopped himself. 'Hang on, are you saying that wasn't you and Richie?'

Bursting out laughing, Bev screeched, 'No! Come on. Me and Richie? That would never work.'

'I don't know,' Ben said. 'I could see it. I just remember you were talking to him last night.'

‘Yeah. Talking,’ Bev clarified, taking a long drag.

Ben held up his hands, ‘Alright, alright. I believe you.’ He was bothered that he felt so relieved. If Beverly had slept with Richie, that was her business, after all.

Beverly noted that he had assumed based on the fact that Richie and Beverly had been talking, and not based on the idea that they were the only two members of the group who were currently single. She also noticed that Ben didn’t seem to much care who it was, as long as it wasn’t her.

‘I didn’t sleep much though, regardless,’ she said. ‘Don’t think anyone did. I talked to Eddie for a bit and then Bill even later.’

Ben pouted, ‘Why didn’t you come and talk to me?’

‘I wanted to,’ Beverly admitted, exhaling a thick plume of smoke.

‘Then why didn’t you?’

She shifted, ‘Sounded like you were on the phone. I didn’t want to disturb you.’

He tensed, ‘Oh.’

Not saying anything, she stubbed her cigarette out on the railing, then flicked the butt away.

‘Did you hear anything?’ Ben asked quietly.

‘No,’ Bev lied, wanting to save him from the potential embarrassment or depression that the truth might elicit.

Ben gripped hard at his railing. ‘I was talking to Francesca.’

Bev coughed awkwardly, ‘How is she?’

He sighed, ‘She’s fine.’

‘How are you?’

Almost crying, Ben turned his head the opposite direction so that Bev

could hardly see his face. 'I don't know.' He thought for a moment, then added, 'I don't get asked that very much.'

Musing, Bev said, 'The question doesn't matter so much as whether you feel you can give an honest answer.'

With a hum, he agreed, 'That's very true. Sometimes that's not because you don't want to give it, but more that you think the other person doesn't want to hear it.'

Bev closed her eyes. 'Also true.' As she reopened them, she turned her head to look at him, and he managed to look at her. 'For the record, I want to hear it. If I ask.'

Ben nodded. 'Likewise.'

'How are you?' she asked.

'I'm sad,' he said, but didn't elaborate.

She breathed deeply through the silence, waiting for him to ask her how she was, but he didn't. Instead, she suggested, 'Should we head out and get some breakfast?'

His stomach grumbled. 'Absolutely.'

'Okay,' she sighed and went back into her room.

'Bev?' he called, and she reappeared. 'How are you?' he asked.

She smiled at him. 'I'm fucking terrible,' she said softly. 'Thanks for asking.'

---

Eddie needed to borrow some clothes. Whilst Richie's shirts were workable, if a little long, and the underwear were fine as they were elasticated, his jeans were downright unwearable, curling onto the

floor at the ends like freshly made pasta.

‘You look like you shrunk in the wash,’ Richie teased, trying to distract himself from how attracted he was to Eddie wearing his clothes.

‘Can you get someone else to lend me something?’ Eddie snapped, his cheeks pink.

‘Why can’t you do it?’ Richie whined.

Eddie blinked, ‘Because I’m not putting on my own dirty clothes after I’ve already showered and I’m not going out in the hall without trousers.’

‘I would,’ Richie shrugged.

‘That’s because you’re a heathen,’ Eddie scolded. ‘Bill should have something that fits me.’

Richie shook his head, ‘Bill’s wearing Stan’s clothes because he went to Atlanta without packing.’

‘Well, I can’t wear Ben’s, yours or Mike’s and if you dare suggest Bev’s clothes one more fucking time, I swear to God, Richie, I will –’

‘Fine,’ Richie rolled his eyes, hauling himself up off the bed. He went over to Eddie and kissed him hard. ‘I’ll go ask Stan if he has spares.’

As he started to leave, Eddie reached for his hand and pulled him back for another quick kiss. ‘Thank you,’ he said.

Richie left the room.

Once he was gone, Eddie shimmied off the jeans and folded them carefully, before putting them back in Richie’s bag. He looked at the other clothes inside, so haphazardly stuffed in without care or attention. There was a bottle of vodka in there too, which made Eddie’s heart sink.

As he walked back to sit on the bed, he spotted the gold of his wedding ring on the floor and bent down to pick it up. He

remembered his wedding day, and that same feeling in his stomach that he'd felt when he'd received Mike Hanlon's call. Fear. Only that day, he hadn't bolted.

Then again, maybe that was because Eddie never really ran away from anything. He didn't run away on his wedding day, because there was nothing to run towards. There was no Richie.

He thought again about that call from Mike. He wasn't running away from Eric. He was running towards Richie, just like he had done on the day that Richie had kissed him for the very first time, pelting through the streets of Derry until he found him on the kissing bridge.

Eddie put the wedding ring in his wallet for safekeeping as he thought about the kissing bridge, the vision they had seen that day, with Richie's shirt slaked in his blood, and Eddie nowhere to be seen. That could be mere hours from now, at least in that parallel timeline.

He wondered whether, in that timeline, he and Richie had ever admitted their feelings to each other. He wondered if he'd still married Eric. He wondered if he and Richie had shared this night in the Derry inn together before it all happened. He wondered if, when they'd walked into the Neibolt house, they'd known just how much they meant to each other.

He wondered if, at the end, Richie knew how much Eddie had lost, if Eddie knew how much Richie had lost, if they were able to share a last, precious moment together before it was all over. He wondered what would happen to Richie after he was gone. He wasn't sure if he hoped that he would forget, to make it easier.

Stan's presence had eased Eddie's sense of impending doom, but he still knew that he was in danger, and that Richie was in danger. While that was true, he would give his everything to show Richie exactly how much he meant to him, in case these few days were all they would have.

He really hoped they wouldn't be.

---

Richie knocked on Stan's door, but Bill answered. He could hear the hiss of the shower from behind the closed bathroom door.

'Oh, hey,' Richie said. 'Guess you're borrowing Stan's clothes too.'

'Too?' Bill queried, glad that he had the most wonderfully perfect excuse for being in Stan's room at this time of the morning.

Richie nodded. 'Eddie didn't pack either and my jeans don't fit him. Has Stan got another spare pair?'

Bill nodded, 'Think s-so. Let m-me check.' He wandered over to their bags and rummaged around. Quickly he found an extra pair of jeans and held them up against himself. 'Might not b-be p-p-perfect but should be o-okay.'

'Thanks,' Richie said, taking them off Bill and heading back to the door.

'Richie?' Bill asked, following him into the corridor.

'Yeah?'

He smacked his lips together. 'You a-and Eddie.'

Instinctively, Richie tensed, 'What about me and Eddie?'

'Well, I m-mean,' he struggled, 'you t-two, you're,' he trailed off again. 'Last n-night, I h-heard,' he opened his eyes wide.

'What?' Richie asked, puffing his chest.

Bill was starting to feel uncomfortable and hurt. 'It's o-okay,' he said, reaching for him, but he pulled away.

'I don't know what you're talking about,' Richie said robotically.

'You know y-you c-can talk to m-me, right?' He stepped closer to him and lowered his voice, 'You c-could always have t-talked to m-me.'

Richie swallowed. Tired, glazed eyes sheened behind his glasses. 'Don't say that.'

'W-why not? It's t-true,' Bill promised.

'It's not,' Richie insisted.

Bill tried not to raise his voice. 'Yes, it is. And I'm really s-sorry if I ever m-made you f-feel that you c-c-couldn't. I know that it w-was hard, b-being in Derry -'

'No, you don't,' Richie scoffed, narrowing his eyes. 'You don't know.'

Flatly, Bill said, 'Yes, I do.' He locked Richie's gaze.

Richie looked confused, motionless, still clutching Stan's jeans in his hand. 'What?' he asked quietly.

Bill raised his eyebrows at him, flattened his lips, trying to convey his meaning without actually saying the words. When Richie still seemed reticent, he said, 'W-well, I've b-b-been,' he started, then backtracked, 'I m-mean, I am,' he searched for the word, gesticulating unhelpfully, then settled on, 'too.'

This was quite a shock to Richie. It had never even occurred to him that he and Eddie weren't alone when they were kids in Derry, let alone that they weren't alone within their own circle of friends. Richie almost felt remorseful, knowing that at least he and Eddie had each other, had someone to talk to about those feelings, someone who could understand and help. He wondered if Bill had ever confided in anyone, if he'd ever felt that he had the same safe space.

'Really?' Richie said. It was all he could think of to say.

Bill nodded, 'Really. Took m-me longer than you to f-f-figure it out, though. First t-time I actually dated a g-g-guy was back end of c-college. There were a c-couple of others, over the years. Girls t-too. Then I m-met Audra and I f-fell in love and you know, that w-was that.'

Apart from his resurfacing feelings for Stan, which he neglected to mention, despite the fact that he had been the first boy that Bill had

ever really loved. It wasn't his place to say, nor did he want to, feeling the guilt rotating inside him like a rotisserie, hot and perpetually in motion.

'Well, fuck,' Richie blurted. He ruminated on this knowledge for a few moments, then threw his arms around Bill's shoulders. Even in the years where he'd been with Eddie, and in the years in between when he'd been in the closet, only ever exploring that side of himself very rarely, he had never really been able to understand how to integrate his attraction to men with his attraction to women.

That had been partly why coming out had seemed so difficult; there was part of him which always second-guessed, always thought that he could make it through pretending, that he didn't need to face it, that there was an easier option. He realised in that moment that if he and Eddie were getting back together, then that option was gone anyway.

Bill released him from the hug. 'We d-don't have to t-talk anymore about it n-now, but if you ever w-want to.'

'Yeah,' Richie nodded, his voice straining. 'Yeah. Thanks.' As Bill turned and started away, Richie called, trotting after him, 'Hey, Bill?'

'Yeah?' Bill said, spinning back around to see Richie right next to him.

Richie bit his lip. 'Me and Eddie? Well, I love him.'

Bill smiled, 'Little inappropriate, d-don't you think? After you f-fucked his mom so many times.'

With a grin, Richie knocked his fist against Bill's arm. Behind them, Richie's door opened. Eddie stood there, wearing one of Richie's T-shirts that was long enough to cover the top half of his boxer shorts.

'You could say that,' Eddie said, rolling his eyes. 'Guys, you both know that these walls are paper fucking thin, right?'

'M-m-morning, Eddie,' Bill blushed.

'Morning, Bill,' Eddie said. 'Richie, can you give me those fucking

jeans already?’

Richie mooned, batting his eyelashes at Bill. ‘You can feel the romance,’ he said, tossing the jeans at Eddie, who disappeared back into the room. ‘We’ll give him a minute and then I’m thinking breakfast,’ Richie suggested.

Bill nodded, toying with his wedding ring again. ‘So, are you two actually b-back t-t-together?’

Feeling awkward, since it wasn’t his marriage which was the one on the line, Richie hesitated, making a guttural croaking sound similar to a dial tone. Then he latched onto, ‘Wait, *back* together? How do you know that we ever *were* together?’ He furrowed his brow, then realised. ‘Oh, that gossipy bitch,’ he laughed. ‘I’m gonna fucking kill her.’

‘Did anyone know at the t-time?’ Bill asked curiously.

Richie pondered, ‘I never told anyone, but I think Stan had us pegged after a while.’

Stan came out of the room. ‘I did,’ he admitted.

Bill wasn’t sure how he felt about this. On the one hand, he understood that it would be a secret that you’d want kept in a town like Derry, but on the other hand, Stan knowing about Richie and Eddie’s relationship made him feel strangely jealous and detached.

He didn’t see what Stan had done differently for Richie and Eddie to feel that they could trust him in a way that they couldn’t trust Bill. He wondered how this exposure had affected Stan, if at all. He wondered how easy it was for Stan to keep from him.

‘Wow, these walls really are paper fucking thin,’ Richie muttered. ‘Morning, Stan.’

‘Morning, Richie,’ Stan smiled.

Distracting himself from his insecurities, Bill asked again, ‘So are you b-back together?’

Eddie came out of the room. 'Yes,' he said to Bill, holding up his left hand, now free of his ring.

'Wow,' Stan exhaled.

'Fuck,' Bill concurred.

Richie looked at Eddie with adoration. Now that the four of them stood there together, out in the corridor, he felt like walls were toppling down inside him, in front of him, even behind him. He didn't feel afraid of his love for Eddie. He didn't feel afraid of sharing it with his friends. He cupped Eddie's jaw and kissed him.

As they pulled away, Eddie beamed, overwhelmed with love and pride. That was the kiss they had never believed they would share, the kiss they had fought against, and now it was theirs. And he knew how much it meant that Richie was ready for it.

'Weird,' Bill laughed. 'Good w-weird, but weird.'

Richie warned, 'Better get used to it quick, because Eddie's fucking obsessed with me.'

Eddie scoffed, 'I think I can control myself.'

'Your mom couldn't,' Richie retorted, and Eddie hit him.

Bill sighed, 'This is b-better.'

Stan just rolled his eyes, like he always used to when he saw Richie and Eddie bickering. 'Come on, let's get some food.'

### **Notes for the Chapter:**

Okay they're finally leaving the inn :) final fight drawing ever closer ... thank you to everyone who's read/given kudos/commented it means so much to me and keeps me writing ! :D very excited for the next few angsty chapters x

## 15. Rock War

### Summary for the Chapter:

The Losers go to breakfast.  
Mike explains the tokens for the ritual.

‘Shut up,’ Bev snorted, feeling the orange juice bubble in her nose as she did so.

‘It’s true!’ Ben cried. ‘When they reunited, I bought the new album, I got tickets for the concert tour and I saw their tour with the Backstreet Boys a few years later.’

She laughed, ‘I cannot believe you are still such a New Kids fan after all this time.’

‘Are you saying you’ve grown out of them?’ he pouted sadly.

Bev thought, ‘Maybe. Although I did name my dog Donnie. Could be a coincidence?’

‘There is no way that’s coincidence,’ Ben insisted.

‘There’s Mike,’ Bev waved him inside the café to join her and Ben at a large round table they had managed to occupy.

‘Good morning,’ Mike said, sitting himself down. ‘Where are the others?’

‘Joining soon.’ Ben said, and no sooner as he had, the rest of the Losers descended.

‘Morning, all,’ Richie greeted, scooting out his chair and sitting down, rubbing his hands together eagerly.

‘You’re chipper,’ Mike commented, remembering Richie’s deeply sombre mood the previous evening.

Everyone else, bar Ben, shot glances at one another and couldn’t help but laugh, even though they knew that Mike was alienated from the

joke. As he complained, demanding to know what was quite so funny, Richie laced his fingers with Eddie's on the table-top, gently caressing with his thumb. Then, briefly, Eddie kissed his cheek.

Ben's eyes immediately searched for Eddie's wedding ring, and he audibly gasped when he realised that Eddie had removed it. In less than twenty-four hours, Eddie had discounted the entire life that he had built outside of Derry for the sake of Richie Tozier. Bev just smiled at them both, so happy for them that it threatened to burst out of her in tears or a piercing scream.

Below the height of the table, Stan let his own hand find Bill's, his own private declaration of a similar sentiment. Bill exhaled carefully, trying not to betray any emotion on his face. He didn't feel contentment in the same way that Richie and Eddie so clearly did and questioned if that meant anything.

Mike was stunned, overjoyed and petrified. 'Oh,' he said, swallowing, staring at their joined hands. 'Wow.'

Once more instilled with a fear he knew all too well, Richie's face dropped. 'What?'

Only Mike didn't know what to say, how to say it. All he could think about was the carnage he had witnessed at the kissing bridge following the Derry carnival killings, when he'd realised that It had returned, when It killed Adrian Mellon and his boyfriend Don Hagerty was half-beaten to death.

He thought about himself too, about the prejudice that he and Angela had received when they were together, unable to walk hand-in-hand down the streets without being stared at. He knew how it felt to not have your relationship understood or recognised.

'Oh, man,' Mike sighed, pinching the end of his nose, hating that he, of all people, had to be the one to shatter a brief moment of joy. He lowered his voice, 'For the record, I am so happy for you both, and I love you, and I love the idea of your chaotic, hysterical friendship becoming a chaotic, hysterical relationship, but,' he darted glances over his shoulders, as though he was afraid they were being watched.

Richie and Eddie let each other go. Under the table, as did Bill and Stan.

‘But?’ Richie pressed, his face wan, his voice cold.

The café owner came over with an expression like steel. He said no words, only held up a rectangular sign which read: *We reserve the right to refuse service to anyone.*

Mike got up out of his seat, throwing his napkin down on the table. ‘But this is Derry,’ he spat.

Eddie stared at the sign with complete malice, whereas Richie just felt defeated. Carefully, Ben ushered Eddie out as Stan went to Richie’s side.

Bill was furious. He went up to the owner and said, ‘You sh-should be f-f-fucking ashamed of yourself,’ before storming out. ‘Twenty-fucking-sixteen,’ he shook his head.

Bev was equally annoyed. She went up to the man and bopped the sign out of his hands and onto the floor, where it clattered angrily. Dissatisfied, she picked up a glass of water and threw it in his face, nodded as he tried to blink through it, burbling, and then she left with a defiant, ‘Asshole!’

As she went outside, she saw the group already heading off down the street, marching in silence, with purpose. Ben had held up, waiting for her.

‘We’re heading to the old hideout. Somewhere we can all talk,’ he explained.

‘This fucking town,’ Bev muttered, shaking her head. ‘I can’t wait to leave.’

---

Richie and Eddie had walked faster than the others, wanting to get away from what they had just experienced, to hole themselves away underground like they had done so many times as children. The others had let them go on ahead, slowing their own pace to give Richie and Eddie a little time before they got there.

Richie hauled open the hatchway and jumped down. He was deeply depressed, his fears all but confirmed by the morning's events, and all he wanted was for Eddie to hold him and tell him that everything was going to be okay, but he worried he'd be left wanting as Eddie was pissed.

Eddie climbed down after him. He was so ready to be furious, to kick at the wooden beams holding up the structure, let it crumble around him, but then he saw the hammock, and it fell away. He went over to it and smiled nostalgically, tugging at the ropes, checking that it still held.

'You remember how we used to fight over this?' Eddie asked.

Richie came up behind him and slipped his arms around Eddie's waist. 'We were never fighting over it. Come on, you know that as well as I do.'

Eddie turned around and tilted his chin up to kiss him. 'We had our first kiss here,' he said.

'I know,' Richie nodded. 'You fucking bit me.'

'I did,' Eddie chuckled. Putting his hand to Richie's cheek, he promised, 'It's not always like that, you know. Not everywhere is like here.'

Richie sighed and twisted his head so that he could kiss Eddie's palm. 'I know. It's just,' he closed his eyes, not needing to finish the phrase.

Nodding, Eddie buried his face into Richie's chest. As they embraced, the other Losers began to arrive. Richie flipped the hammock over to its underside to dispel the dust and sat down.

'That is so fucking unsanitary,' Eddie complained, so Richie grabbed him and forced him to sit down whilst Eddie yelped his complaints. 'I

hate you,' he grumbled, wiping his hands down Richie's shirt as he frowned.

'No, you don't,' Richie said, relaxing, lacing their fingers back together. They could do that here, and so he would. He felt Eddie squeeze his hand, and he let himself smile.

'Are you b-both okay?' Bill asked them quietly, and they nodded.

Even quieter, Richie asked, 'Are you?'

Bill rested a hand on Richie's shoulder and nodded subtly. 'Thanks,' he whispered, then went to plant himself on the wooden crate in the corner beside Stan, who he also suspected might be privately shaken. 'Are we all h-here?' he called out to the rest of the group, and they murmured their agreement. 'Okay, M-Mikey.'

Mike stood, rubbing his hands. 'I'm sorry that we've had such a lousy start to the day,' he said, as though it were his fault in the slightest. 'And I'm sorry that I have to keep bringing down the tone, but we need to refocus on It.'

Bev nodded, 'Agreed. You said you had an idea of how we defeat It.'

'I do. There's a ritual. I've researched it heavily, and I think it might work.'

'A ritual?' Stan asked, his blood curdling. Rituals made him think of religion, of animal sacrifice and satanic necromancy.

'It starts with us,' Mike said. 'We have to find something, a token, representative of us, our memories of that summer, our fears, and our relationship to It.'

Richie put his head in his hands. 'Fucking whoopee,' he said sarcastically.

'When we have everything,' Mike went on, 'we go and face It. We perform the ritual. We kill It.'

'Today?' Eddie squeaked, his heart pounding. That meant today was the day he had been previously destined to die.

Mike frowned, 'Depends how quickly we can find our tokens. But obviously, the longer we wait, the longer the people of Derry are in danger. Despite that including assholes like that café manager, there are a lot of good people here too: families with kids that will be terrorised just like we were. So we need to move as quickly as possible.'

'Are you suggesting that we split up?' Ben asked.

'Veto,' Eddie said. 'No way. I'm not going anywhere by myself.' It wasn't out of fear that something would happen to himself or Richie in the time spent apart, but he didn't know what would happen when they came back together.

'Ditto,' Richie agreed. 'That sounds like an easy way to get picked off by It.'

'Mike's right, though,' Bev said. 'We can't go around the seven of us. It will take ages.'

Stan added, 'How honest are we going to need to be with ourselves, with each other, about those fears? Some of them,' he slaked his tongue over his teeth, 'Some of them might be fucking hard to face.'

Bev raked the hair away from her face. 'I don't mind going alone,' she said.

Ben chewed his lip, 'You don't have to. I don't think any of us should.' Having asked her how she was doing this morning, he was worried for Beverly to be isolated from the group. 'I don't want you to.'

'Compromise,' Bill announced. 'We s-split into groups. Richie and Eddie. Stan, Mike and me. Ben and Bev. No one goes a-alone.'

Bev clenched her jaw. She really wanted to go alone.

'Well, I already have my token,' Mike said. 'I've had a while to think about it, so you and Stan can go on without me.'

'What is it?' Stan asked. 'Maybe that will help us to find ours.'

Mike sat down, fishing into his bag. Eventually, he found what he was looking for, as the other Losers waited in anticipation. He pulled out a hunk of grey rock.

‘Rock war,’ Richie said under his breath, remembering.

Mike nodded, ‘But there’s more to it than that. So much more.’

‘Like what?’ Bill asked.

He hesitated, holding the stone in his hand so tightly that he could feel every jagged angle on its underside digging into his palm.

‘We need to be fucking straight with each other,’ Eddie demanded, exasperated. ‘If we can’t, then we’re doomed. It’s going to reveal all our fears to us anyway. The more we know about each other’s, the stronger we’ll be.’

Mike sighed. ‘Okay. This rock makes me think of a lot of things. It makes me think of the rock war, of Henry Bowers and his gang and that attack against us, against me, one of many, many attacks against me through my life.’

Ben squeezed his stool over to be closer to Mike’s and laid a comforting hand on his knee. Similarly moved, Bev came to kneel in front of him, resting a hand on his shin.

Mike continued, ‘Strike two rocks together, and you get a spark that becomes a fire. Drinks on the rocks like they used to serve at The Black Spot. The literal and metaphorical rocks that have been thrown at me my whole life by people in this town, including this one, which broke through the window of my home one night when I was home with Angela only a few years ago.’

Stan got up and went to sit beside him, wrapping an arm around his shoulders. Bill soon followed, standing behind him, hand on his collar.

‘But it makes me think of good things too, empowering things. Like that rock war being the day that we became friends, the day that people stood up for me. It makes me think of the rocky cliff face of the quarry where we go to swim. It makes me think of the rock I put

on Angela's finger.'

Richie and Eddie vacated the hammock to join their friends, squeezing into the gaps around him, holding each other, like a gorgeous, pained statue.

Mike sighed, 'Angela and I didn't have it easy when we got together. She's white, and I'm obviously not. People have hard enough of a time accepting the black man in their midst, the one who looks different from them and therefore they don't get to know.'

Ben and Stan caught each other's eye. They knew how that felt; to be different based on how you look, on your size, on the clothes that you wear, on the practises of your family.

'We don't feel comfortable holding hands walking down the street, or kissing each other in public spaces, even dining in certain restaurants. But when I look at her face, her kind, warm, intelligent face, I know that it's worth it. I know that she's worth it.'

Richie and Eddie reached for each other's hands. They had been there, back then and now.

'Yet at the same time, I feel that this town can be like a rock, where I cannot see the changes day to day, cannot always see the edges of a harsh and intolerant society being worn down, cannot hear the language changing, the right voices getting louder, the cheeks turning towards and not away.'

Beverly rested her chin on his knee, looking up at him. She struggled to see those things too.

'But they are, slowly. If you six can accept me as your friend so unquestioningly, if my colleagues, scholars and students at the library can accept me as one of their own and treat me no differently, if Angela Trent can give me her heart so wholly, then there's hope. And my faith in her and you all is like a rock: unshakeable.'

Bill nodded, tightening his grip on Mike's shoulder, a show of solidarity, of blind trust.

'Rock is tough, and it can be chipped at and cut as much as it can be

sculpted and carved. That's why it's perfect. We know It's fucked with us, so we're going to pick ourselves up and throw ourselves right back in its smug, clown face.'

'Yeah. W-we are,' Bill agreed.

'Let's go.'

### **Notes for the Chapter:**

I'm going on holiday 14th to 18th - I'm going to try and set up some draft chapters to post in the interim days so that I can keep giving you regular updates !

## 16. Change

### Summary for the Chapter:

Bill and Stan find Georgie's boat.  
Richie and Eddie go to the pharmacy.  
Ben and Bev go to the school.

### Notes for the Chapter:

Chapter 16 today 18/11  
No chapter 19/11  
Chapter 17 will come on 20/11  
No chapter 21/11  
Chapter 18 will come on 22/11 and then back to  
daily chapters :)

Bill stopped outside his old house, staring up the driveway, hands in his pockets. He looked up at what used to be his bedroom window and thought of Georgie standing where he was stood now, wearing his yellow raincoat on that fateful day, clutching the same paper boat slick with wax that he now held in his hand, plucked from the sewer grate where his brother had lost his life.

Bill hadn't been sick that fateful day, but he'd told Georgie that he was, so that he didn't have to play with him outside. If Bill hadn't lied, Georgie wouldn't have been alone, and maybe It wouldn't have been able to take him.

The last time Bill had seen his brother, his real brother, not a hallucination, he'd waved up at Bill with a beaming smile as the rain beat down, believing him to be someone who was always looking out for him.

'You were a good brother, Bill,' Stan said quietly, coming up to stand beside him.

Bill blinked, 'No, I w-wasn't.'

'Yes, you were,' Stan said. 'What happened was not your fault.'

‘I should have b-been there.’

Stan clapped a hand on his shoulder and started to guide him away. ‘You can’t always be there. Sometimes that’s just what happens. We make tiny decisions every day and we don’t know what the consequences will be.’

Bill chewed his lip. ‘But I should m-make the decisions which help. Like w-with you. We saw that vision and so we m-made our decisions to change it. We s-stopped it. You’re h-here. I should have done that f-for Georgie.’

‘You didn’t see a vision for Georgie. You couldn’t possibly know,’ Stan insisted.

‘But all it t-took to s-save you, on my part, was to b-be a good friend. Fuck,’ he shook his head, ‘That m-must have been one shitty alternate version of me, to let you d-die after I let my brother die.’

Stan gripped his lapels. ‘That is *not* what happened. To be honest, Bill, I’m a little insulted. You are not responsible for saving my life and you would not be responsible for my death either.’

Bill shook him off, not looking at him. He turned and started to walk down the street, towards the town. Chasing after him, Stan ran until he was stood in front of him, stopping him in his tracks.

‘Bill, when you all saw that vision, when you found out what happened to me, I was more isolated than I’d ever been, and the reason that changed is because *I* reached out to you. When I found out what happened to me, *I* did the research and *I* shared it with you. When we talked, *I* chose to tell the truth, to be honest with you.’

Looking down at the boat in his hands, Bill squeezed at the folds in the paper so that it popped. His brow furrowed as he noticed a streak of colour.

Stan continued, trying to regain his attention, the temperature of his voice scalding. ‘If I didn’t do all those things, then there isn’t anything that you could have done. I had to want things to change. And I did. I do. Please don’t take that away from me by assuming

that you can play God, that you have a say in whether I live or I die.'

Hands trembling, Bill slowly unfurled the origami boat.

'It killed your brother,' Stan stated. 'I didn't kill myself. You're not part of those sentences because you're not involved. Don't you get it?'

As the last crease in the paper was unfolded, Bill's eyes swam with tears. 'I g-g-get it,' he whispered, staring down at one of the particularly graphic illustrations he had made of Stan's suicide, then he burst into tears, his head falling onto Stan's shoulder.

Stan wrapped his arms around him, 'Hey, I'm sorry. I don't like yelling.'

'It's not that,' Bill mumbled. 'I j-just think that m-m-maybe I needed to b-believe that I'd s-saved you b-because I couldn't s-save him. That m-maybe I could s-set things right.' He breathed, 'But it w-wasn't my job to s-s-save you.'

'And I don't want to feel like I was a job,' Stan added. 'I don't want to feel like work.'

'You're n-not,' Bill promised, wiping his eyes. 'You're not. I'm s-sorry.'

Stan saw the page in Bill's hands, the page he had seen all those years ago, crumpled along with countless other drawings and pages of handwritten text. 'Token,' he said quietly.

Bill nodded, folding the page back up into its original boat shape. 'Token.' He looked at Stan sadly, then slid the boat into his back pocket, no longer wanting to look at it.

Stepping closer to Stan, Bill slotted their lips together, wrapping his hands around Stan's uncut wrists, stroking along the blue veins with his thumb. Stan kissed him back, softly, letting the painful acceptance flood out of Bill's touch.

'Okay,' Bill said as he pulled away. 'Let's f-f-find yours.'

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Richie toyed with the gold token in his hands that they'd picked up at the arcade. It had been many years since he'd thought about that day. It had been many years since he'd talked about it with Eddie. Even so, Eddie didn't ask many questions. He wanted to wait until Richie was ready to talk about it.

As they walked past the pharmacy, Eddie's head snapped. 'Rich, can we stop in?'

Richie eyed him curiously, 'Why?' He thought about Eddie's regular trips there as a child, the placebos lining his fanny-pack, his bathroom counter, his bedside table.

'You spoke to Bev last night, didn't you?' Eddie said, ensuring that he was protecting her privacy. 'I spoke to her too. About her face.'

Biting his lower lip, Richie said, 'Oh, that. Fucking wanker.'

'There's a cream that I told her I'd pick up. Good for bruises,' Eddie said dreamily, his mind drifting, a memory veiled over that he couldn't quite access as he looked at the pharmacy doors. Then, without another word, he wandered inside.

Richie called after him. 'Eddie?'

When he heard no response, Richie ambled inside. He hated the smell of the place, it reminded him of hospitals and janitor's closets.

'Eddie?' Richie called again.

'I'm here,' Eddie waved him into a corner of the store.

'Where'd you go just now?' Richie asked, his hands waving. 'Thought I saw you disappear into your head there for a second.'

Eddie turned to him, a glassiness in his eyes, 'I'm not going anywhere,' he said hoarsely. Then he rasped, gasped, clutching his chest as though he were having an asthma attack.

‘Eddie?’ A hint of panic crept into Richie’s voice. He knew that Eddie didn’t really have asthma, but right now he was pale and his lips were tinging blue, and purplish veins sprung vivid and dilated on the periphery of his face. ‘Eddie, look at me.’

Eddie did, and Richie saw his eyes dulling, and blood oozed from a throbbing wound in the hollow of his cheek. A thick rivulet of black bubbled over from his lower lip and the hands clutching at his chest opened to reveal a hole at least six inches in diameter, so that Richie could see clean through Eddie’s torso.

‘Richie?’ Eddie burbled, and the lights flickered out.

‘Eddie!’ Richie yelled, lunging into the darkness, only he couldn’t grab hold of anything. ‘Eddie!’ He slipped on the floor, pushing out his palms to break his fall. When he stood, they were sticky, syrupy. He looked down at his Hawaiian shirt, similarly wet and adhering to the skin on his chest. A Hawaiian shirt he’d seen before, twenty-seven years ago. ‘No, no, no.’

Richie leapt through the aisles, searching, until he found a man slumped up against the wall, bleeding out. ‘Eddie!’ he hollered, dropping in front of him.

‘Richie?’ the grey-faced man croaked. ‘I fucked your mom,’ he said, managing to smile, and then a last, fragile breath escaped his lips, and he was gone.

‘Eddie,’ Richie cried, drawing the dead weight of the corpse close against his chest, weeping.

‘Richie?’

A hand rested on Richie’s shoulder and he leapt, stumbling backwards and crashing into the cabinet, sending painkillers and laxatives scattering over the floor, before tripping over completely. The lights flickered back on. Eddie was standing there, his eyes wide and concerned as he saw Richie gulping and sweating, sprawled on the tiles.

‘Richie, what the fuck?’ Eddie asked, a blackish, brownish slime

coating his body as he leaned down towards him.

Traumatised, Richie slapped his hands away.

‘Whoa, what happened to you?’ Eddie knitted his eyebrows together. ‘I thought I was the one who’d been fucked over.’

Richie saw the light in his eyes as they danced over his face, saw the tan of his unblemished cheeks even through the layer of goop, the redness in his lips, and his own, untorn but stained, oversized t-shirt draped over Eddie’s body. In his hand, he held a box of cream which Richie vaguely recognised, and a blue inhaler, like the one he used to carry as a kid.

‘Fuck,’ Richie managed. ‘Are you okay?’

‘Barely,’ Eddie said. ‘I need a shower or I’m going to throw up just like this fucking leper threw up over me. Are you okay?’

Reaching up, Richie dragged Eddie into his arms and huddled into him, needing to feel the warmth of him, the breath from his lungs, even if he was covered in muck. ‘Fucking hell, Eds. I saw you. It was you, but you were It. Christ, It’s using you against me, just like I fucking knew It would.’

Eddie pulled away enough so that he could look into Richie’s eyes. He’d never seen Richie like this before. As children, Richie had never told him about seeing It before the altercation in the Neibolt house where Eddie had broken his wrist. ‘What did you see?’

Whimpering, Richie choked on the words. ‘I think I saw the version of you from that day on the kissing bridge. I saw,’ he squeezed his eyes shut, trying to force the image away, ‘I saw how you died.’ All he could see was that hole, that great gaping hole. He’d never needed to know how it felt to look straight through Eddie, to see the shreds of his internal organs, to see the world beyond.

Chills swarmed through Eddie. ‘Fuck,’ he whispered. ‘It knows we’re coming for It. It’s going to give us everything It’s got.’

‘I just have to remember that it’s not fucking real,’ Richie said.

‘The fear’s real, Richie,’ Eddie said quietly.

Richie shuddered, ‘Let’s get out of here.’

Eddie nodded, hauling Richie to his feet, staring down at himself with disgust. ‘Yeah. I fucking hate this place.’

‘Got your token, though. That’s something,’ Richie said, tapping the blue inhaler in his hand.

‘That’s something,’ Eddie agreed.

---

As they reached the school, Bev stopped in her tracks. ‘Ben, I don’t want to go in there.’

Ben stared up at the façade. ‘This is where I need to go. I’m sure of it,’ he said.

‘Well, I’m not going in. I have nothing but bad memories.’ Bev twitched at the thought, as she remembered trash water being thrown over her even as she tried to hide in a graffiti-walled toilet cubicle, trying to escape the names which had been scrawled on every wall, on the bits of paper that were tucked into her locker and her bag, which were hollered after her everywhere she went.

Like muscle memory, Ben reached for her hand, feeling her flinch at the soothing, familiar touch. ‘I don’t have many good memories myself. That’s why I think I need to be here.’

She slipped out of his grip. ‘I won’t go in with you.’

Fear slithered through him. ‘No?’

‘No,’ she said indignantly. ‘I’ll wait here for you.’

He watched as she perched herself on the low brick wall, fishing for

the cigarettes in her back pocket. 'Okay. I'll try and be quick.'

She nodded and waited for him to slip through the double doors. Counting under her breath until she reached three, she prayed that Ben would be alright, but she firmly believed that she had to face her demons alone.

'Three Mississippi,' she said quietly to herself, putting the unlit cigarette back into the pack and into her jeans, before she started to walk off down the road.

'Bev?' she heard a voice call after her.

Wincing, she stopped and turned around. Ben stood in the awning of the school. He trudged down the steps and stood by the sign, leaning against it.

'You really think I don't know you better than that?' Ben asked, but his eyes were sad.

She didn't say anything, merely dropped her head, partly ashamed, partly irritated that she had been caught.

He walked closer to her. 'You don't have to fight alone.'

'I've been fighting alone my whole life,' Bev said.

Ben's face crumpled. 'I really hope you don't believe that's true. We've always been there to help you if you asked. We wanted to help. I wanted to help. Like the time when we came to your home and helped clean the blood from the bathroom.'

'That was *after* I'd fought It. Alone,' Bev clarified.

He put his hands on her shoulders, 'You don't have to prove anything to anyone. You don't have to prove anything to yourself. You are already the strongest one here. Letting people in is not a weakness. Asking for help is not a weakness.'

'It's not that I don't want to ask for help,' she whispered.

'Then what is it?'

She sighed, 'People don't know how to offer the help I need. It's not that I'm ungrateful. I love that the Losers came to my aid to clean up the blood in the bathroom, or how my friend Donna noticed when I lost weight and wanted to get me a new dietician, or how Eddie offered to pick up a medication to take down the bruising in my face.'

Ben's face creased as he leaned closer, studying her, trying to see what she was talking about. 'What bruising?' he asked.

'See,' she sighed, shaking her head. 'You don't even see it. That's the problem. You don't want to see it. It comes from a good place. You care about me too much to want to know what's really going on under the surface, because it hurts you.'

He dipped his head and drew her into an embrace. 'Then I want to change.'

There were parallels that Ben could draw between Beverly Marsh and his relationship with Francesca Willoughby. He didn't even see the problems that were there in their relationship because he didn't want to see them. He cared about her too much to want to know what was lurking beneath the tip of the iceberg, the shiny exterior of their beautiful, crystalline lives.

'Sometimes it's too late to change. Patterns are patterns. They repeat.' Bev said melancholically.

'Nothing lasts forever,' Ben said desperately, stroking the fine tendrils of her red hair, 'except maybe for love.'

She exhaled heavily and stepped away, 'That's not true.'

'What?'

Smacking her lips together as she continued to move backwards, she said, 'Only one man has ever truly loved me.'

'Bev,' he breathed.

'And you don't anymore.'

She turned and ran away.

He called after her, 'There's more than one kind of love, Bev.' Then she was gone, and he mumbled to himself, thinking about the yearbook page that he was going to retrieve from his old locker, 'And I love you every way a person can.'

### **Notes for the Chapter:**

See you all when I'm back from Berlin !

## 17. We Always Won

### Summary for the Chapter:

Mike gets a call from a panicked Ben.  
Stan and Bill struggle to find Stan's token.  
Richie and Eddie run into Henry Bowers.  
Beverly goes home.

Mike stared at the missing poster of Dean, the young boy who lived at Bill's old house. Only a few years older than Georgie had been. He looked at another missing poster: Victoria. She was distinctive; she had a strawberry birthmark on her cheek. He looked at the newspaper clippings detailing the attacks on Don Hagerty and Adrian Mellon which culminated in Adrian's death.

'It's doing it on purpose,' Mike muttered to himself. 'It's trying to piss us off.'

A young kid like Georgie, innocent and naïve, like the Losers had once been. A young girl who other kids picked on for being different, like the Losers had once been. A same-sex couple like the one which had just been revealed to him, which reminded him of his own relationship, which he didn't even know paralleled more than one pairing amongst his friends.

He dreaded what might happen next if they didn't act fast.

His phone rang. He answered it.

'Mike?' Ben hollered into the phone. 'Mike, I've got split up from Bev.'

'What?' Mike asked. 'How? Did it take her?' His heart pounded as he thought about the last time this had happened, when she had been gripped by the throat and suspended in the deadlights, destined to live and relive the deaths of her friends until Ben's kiss saved her.

Ben rubbed his forehead. 'No, she ran. She wants to find her token alone.'

‘How did this happen?’ Mike asked, a little disappointed.

He swallowed, ‘I had to let her go. She’d made her mind up. If I’d forced myself around her, she would have only pushed away harder.’

Mike growled low under his breath. ‘Then what do we do?’

Ben gritted his teeth. ‘I have an idea.’

---

Stan and Bill had circled the town and come up short, ending up back in the hideout under the ground.

‘There’s got to b-be something,’ Bill murmured, slumping down onto the crate.

Biting his lip, Stan sat beside him. ‘I just can’t think. Maybe,’ he started, twisting himself round so that his knee knocked against Bill’s, ‘Maybe if you talked to me more about yours, then that might help me find mine.’

‘But you know w-what this is,’ Bill said, pulling the boat out of his pocket.

‘Yeah, I do,’ Stan said, taking Bill’s hand in his own. ‘I know that’s Georgie’s boat. But you heard Mike talking about his. A rock wasn’t just a rock. So what else is it?’

Bill whispered, ‘You’ll f-float too.’

‘Bill?’ Stan asked nervously.

‘Floating.’

‘Floating?’ Stan queried.

‘That’s w-what I’m really afraid of and w-what I really hope I can always d-do. I’m afraid of Georgie f-f-floating in Pennywise’s lair, I’m

afraid of Bev f-f-floating in the deadlights, I'm afraid of Betty Ripsom's shoes f-f-floating in the sewers.'

Stan closed his eyes, trying not to remember.

'But at the s-same time, I hope I f-float. I hope I s-stay afloat. I h-hope that I don't drown in this. Drown in the memories or drown in the forgetting.'

For a minute, Stan thought about his body floating in the bathwater, had he climbed inside, like a sensory-deprivation tank, the feeling, the light falling away.

'Forgetting sometimes feels like being in the ocean, stranded, floating your way through, searching for an island. But remembering doesn't feel like finding land either. Remembering feels like sinking, like being dragged under, where it's dark and the pressure just builds in my ears like volume.'

Stan thought again about being down in the bowels of the Neibolt house and shuddered, huddling closer to him.

'It's all just water. Like the w-water I hallucinated filling my basement, or the w-water down in the b-bottom of that well in the Neibolt house, or,' he broke off, 'even b-bathwater.'

'Listening,' Stan promised, gently resting his head on Bill's shoulder.

Bill chewed his lip. 'A b-boat is the exact opposite of a bath, in a weird way, keeping the w-water out rather than keeping it in. And I don't know which I'd rather b-be; the thing keeping the b-bad stuff out, or the thing keeping the b-bad stuff in.'

'You don't have to be either,' Stan said quietly.

'You always c-call a boat 'she',' Bill said, remembering one of the last things that he ever said to his brother. 'A ship. A ship is s-supposed to be a she, a g-girl.' He toyed with the folded, unfolded, refolded paper. 'But when I think about b-b-boats, I only think about G-Georgie,' he snapped his eyes up to meet Stan's, 'and you.'

Stan smiled as Bill's hand drew up to his cheek and traced gently

down the skin, skin that was growing coarse as the stubble poked through on an unshaven face. He didn't have his razor, and Bill hoped he would never need it again. They closed their eyes and kissed, lips floating over each other's, diving again and again, holding each other up.

They sat there for a moment together, peacefully, silently, as though the whole world had stopped turning on its axis, as though the nightmare had been placed on pause. In the recesses of his crowded mind, Stan managed to grab hold of a single coherent thought: that he loved Bill Denbrough, more than just about anyone else in the world.

A spider dangled precariously from a thread of silk, coming between them.

'If we're going to stay in here much longer, we should really think about wearing one of those old -' Stan started, gasped, and then leapt to peel up the floorboard which concealed the tin of shower caps. The label was dirty and faded, but still clearly read: *Property of Stanley Uris*. He popped the lid with a fizz and pulled out one of the floral, plastic headpieces with fond nostalgia. 'Token,' he insisted.

Bill laughed, 'Why?'

'I'm not sure yet,' Stan said, smiling. 'I just know that it is.'

As he sat back down, Bill gazed at him affectionately. 'Sometimes you just know.'

---

Richie had never been so terrified in his life as when he heard the strange noises emanating from Eddie's bathroom in the Derry Inn, an inaudible discussion surrounding an audible ruckus complete with window smash. He hammered on the door, shrieking for Eddie to open up, and eventually he did, with wide eyes, hand pressed to his cheek where there was a slashed wound.

‘Oh, fuck,’ he murmured, then slumped against the wardrobe.

‘Eddie,’ Richie panicked. ‘What the hell happened?’

Eddie stumbled over the words. ‘It was Bowers. It was really him, that mullet-wearing asshole. He stabbed me in the fucking face. Fucking Christ, it hurts.’

‘Fucking hell,’ Richie yelled. ‘Are you alright? Where is he now? I’ll fucking kill him.’

He patted Richie’s shoulder limply. ‘No, I’m not alright. There’s a fucking hole in my face that’s not supposed to be there. He’s gone, I don’t know where, but he’s injured. I took the knife out of my face and stabbed him with it.’

Richie blinked at him. ‘You fucking what?’ He mimed, ‘You got stabbed in the face, so you can see and feel a fucking knife sticking out of your face, and your instinct is just to pull it out and fucking stab the asshole back?’

Eddie curled his upper lip, ‘I guess.’

‘Fucking hell,’ Richie muttered. ‘I forgot that you can be such an angry psycho. Remind me to never piss you off.’

‘You’ve pissed me off nearly every day I’ve known you,’ Eddie reminded, smiling.

Richie tried to smile back. ‘You make it too easy and too fun.’

Hauling himself to his feet, Eddie lunged, tripping, gripping onto Richie’s arm and trying to make it over to the bed. ‘Can you see if you can find me a first aid kit? You’d think there’d be one somewhere in this place.’

Richie didn’t move. ‘I don’t want to leave you.’

Eddie clapped his hand on Richie’s neck. ‘You’ll be two seconds. I’ll be fine alone for two seconds, but I won’t be fine with an open, unprotected wound on my face.’

Then Richie recalled the vision he had seen, the hallucination in the pharmacy, of Eddie's death. There had been a wound on his cheek then, a slash, oozing thick, coagulating blood. 'Oh, fuck,' he mumbled to himself, trying to force away the fearful tears prickling in his eyes.

'What?' Eddie asked, noting the change in expression.

'No, no, no,' Richie's hands trembled as the vivid hallucinations slammed into the forefront of his brain.

'Richie, you're freaking me out,' Eddie said honestly, as his eyes scanned Richie's pale face. At that moment, he heard noises from the corridor, distinct voices calling his and Richie's names, so he broke his attention momentarily to reply, 'We're in here!'

Bill, Stan, Mike and Ben clattered into the room, frantic and loud.

'Whoa, what happened?' Mike asked, leaping over to Eddie to admire the assault on his face. Richie stepped back and away, staring blankly.

'Fucking Bowers did it,' Eddie replied.

'B-Bowers?' Bill replied. 'Jesus, we can't c-catch a fucking b-break.'

Stan snapped his fingers, 'I'll run downstairs and see if I can find a first aid kit.'

'Thank you!' Eddie cried after him. 'What are you all doing back here? Where's Bev? Do you have your tokens?'

'We came to find you guys,' Ben said. 'We have our tokens and I really hope you've found yours because Bev's missing. I think I might know where she is and I think we should all go and find her together. No more splitting up.'

Bill scratched his neck. 'Are you going to b-be alright, Eddie? Can you come?'

'If I get patched up, I should be fine,' Eddie said, trying to stop himself from poking his tongue through the slice in his face. His stomach flipped.

‘Eddie?’ Richie said quietly, the first thing he had managed to say since the intrusion.

Eddie looked at Richie, then back to Bill, Ben and Mike. ‘Guys can you go help Stan look for a first aid kit? We need a minute.’

They left without question.

‘Come here,’ Eddie beckoned, and Richie went to him. ‘What is it? Please, just tell me.’

Richie swallowed. ‘In the vision I saw at the pharmacy, you had,’ he began, bringing his hand to Eddie’s cheek. ‘Fuck.’

‘Okay,’ Eddie choked. ‘Fuck, okay. That’s,’ he breathed. ‘Fucking hell.’

‘I can’t,’ Richie strained, dipping his head.

Eddie yanked Richie’s head up. ‘Listen to me. You have enough fears crammed into that forty-year-old comedian trashmouth ass of yours for a fucking lifetime of demon alien clowns. Do not turn me back into one of them. I am scared enough for the both of us when it comes to the idea that I don’t make it out of that house.’

Richie closed his eyes. ‘I can’t lose you.’

‘You haven’t always been afraid of that,’ Eddie refuted, surprising even himself as the thought came to him. ‘You know how to break past it.’

‘What?’

Eddie fumbled to grip Richie’s hands. ‘That day, that day in the hideout when you kissed me. Fuck, Richie, you believed, you firmly believed, that kissing me would end our friendship. You took that shot.’

Richie considered this.

Eddie added, ‘And when we were driving back to the inn, after the restaurant, you weren’t going to try anything with me unless you

knew that I was unhappy. When you thought Eric and I were happily married, you said that you needed to grow up. You were going to let me go.'

'There's more than one fucking way to lose someone.'

'Yeah,' Eddie breathed, thinking about the alcohol nestled in Richie's luggage, thinking about how he'd forgotten Richie as he'd left for Columbia, thinking about how he and Richie had lost the other Losers, bar Stan, as they hid their relationship from the world as children. 'Yeah, there is.'

'But that house,' Richie breathed.

Eddie's core tightened. 'Don't be afraid of losing me, because,' he choked, 'you could never lose me. Not really. You didn't lose me when I went to college, not even when I got married, because here I am, twenty years later, still as in love with you as I was as a teenager. And even if something did happen to me -'

'Don't,' Richie begged, but Eddie took no heed.

'You still wouldn't have lost me, Rich. Because we fucking won. We've called ourselves Losers since we were eight years old, but we've been fucking winning. We found each other and loved each other our whole lives, despite all the fucking bullshit that's come our way. That's a fucking win, Rich. You and me, we always won, at every fucking turn.'

Richie kissed him, hard and heavy, with all the fight and bite of the first, with all the passion and desperation of a last. 'I love you, Eds.'

'I love you too, asshole. Stop calling me Eds.'

He sighed. 'I'm sorry I've been a bit shit today at being there for you. I've been so wrapped up in my own fucking head. You've got your own shit to deal with and you probably want to talk about it, but I know what you're afraid of and it scares me so fucking much too that I haven't been able to ask.'

'It's okay, Rich, I get it,' Eddie promised. 'We have time.'

‘I fucking hope so.’

The other Losers bandied back into the room to patch up Eddie’s face, which didn’t take too long. Then they rallied and headed back out of the inn and into the Derry afternoon.

‘Where are we going?’ Stan asked.

Ben steeled his nerves. ‘We’re going to Bev’s old home.’

---

Bev held onto the postcard of poetry that Ben had written for her and tried to cry in silence in what used to be her old bedroom. The old woman in the other room would come for her shortly, she was sure, but she hoped that she could eke out these bleak, vulnerable minutes.

‘Winter fire,’ she said quietly to herself. ‘January embers.’ Balance, like yin and yang, the cold with the warm. ‘Token.’

She thought about what Ben had yelled after her as she ran from the school front. There’s more than one kind of love. While she knew that was true, through so much of her life she had been deprived of loves that she should have been given.

The love from a mother, stolen with death. The love from a father, corrupted. The love from the Losers, forgotten.

Even as her life had gone on beyond the confines of Derry. There was no love from Tom Rogan, only violence. There was no love from her family, only genetics. There was no love from her work, only rejection.

And now that she had come back to Derry, and memories had returned to her, she became confronted with heartbreak again.

The love from Bill Denbrough, misinterpreted. The love from Ben Hanscom, overwritten.

The love for herself, never learned.

## 18. Choose To Believe

### Summary for the Chapter:

The Losers go to find Bev.

Henry Bowers returns.

Ben and Bill discuss their conflicting feelings.

Stan asks Eddie how he can face It.

### Notes for the Chapter:

Sorry for the delay/hiatus due to my holidays!

Back today as normal and hope you enjoy this chapter :)

Beverly screamed as It scraped its nails down over its eyes, tearing great red slits down its face, the skin peeling upwards and curling, shrivelling as soon as it was exposed to the elements. The old woman transformed into a monstrous, troll-like entity, with great sagging breasts and eyelids, skin the colour of pruned olives, towering over her.

‘Beverly!’ she heard someone call.

‘Stop!’ she begged, clamping her hands over her ears as she backed into a corner.

Then she heard another voice, ‘Bev! Bev!’

Squeezing her eyes closed, her back slid down the wall, body folding up on itself, knees and feet drawing inwards.

‘Bev, where are you?’ a third voice yelled.

‘I’m in my happy place, I’m in my happy place,’ she murmured to herself, mantra, the kind that used to cycle around her head as her father laid his weight over her, as Tom laid his hands on her.

‘She’s here! She’s here, I found her.’ Voice four.

Bev didn’t dare open her eyes or remove her hands from her ears,

desperately trying to find her happy place, trying to be anywhere else.

'I'm in my happy place,' she repeated.

So unsure what was real and what was fake, she was afraid that if she gave into the delusion of her friends really being there, she would open her eyes to find It's gaping maw unhinged before her.

'Bev? Can you hear me?' Number five.

She thought of the Deadlights circling each other, spreading cataracts over her eyes as she was once more suspended in a nightmare. If she were forced to see their deaths again, she thought it just might be the end for her.

'Leave me alone,' she hissed into the ether, unaware if it was falling on deaf ears, tapping into the eardrums of a human or a monster, echoing through the tunnels of a hollow sewer or off the walls of a tiled bathroom.

She didn't know where she was anymore, but she was drifting, like an astronaut stranded in space, propelled forwards, destined to travel indefinitely in a singular, indeterminate direction until bent by a force of gravity or a meteor striking her chest. Everything black, vacuous, airless.

'Sh-should w-we t-try and m-move her?' Six.

The sixth voice reverberated inside her as much as the stammer on his lips, and she thought of a boy with dark hair and a pretty face, with a bike called Silver and an empty bedroom across his hall, who once had kissed her with all the precious innocence that can be gifted at thirteen, who had offered her a salient piece of advice.

Be nice to yourself. Someone should be.

'Bill,' she said, with all the precious innocence that she imagined she should have had as a girl, but rarely had until she met Bill Denbrough. Six.

'Yeah, I'm h-here, B-Bev,' he said.

‘Is she alright?’ Five.

‘I don’t know.’ Four.

Five. His voice sat heavy in the air, as though it were weighed down by the world on his shoulders, a world he had tried to carry for too long and had periodically considered relinquishing. She thought of a boy with tired, rolling eyes and curled hair which darkened every year, who chose to cut his hand on glass by the quarry instead of his wrists on a razor in the bathtub, who had promised her that he would see her again, and kept his promise to her.

Promises, secrets and oaths. I swear, I swear, I swear: a trinity of declarations made and kept with the clasp of hands, black and white. Balance. Yin and yang. Winter fire. She thought of a boy who searched for the shadows, searched for the truth in a sea of impossible fiction, who read history to rewrite it, who she had once told the future, which he had sacrificed his happiness to secure. Four.

Friends keep their promises.

‘Stan,’ she said. ‘Mike.’

‘Christ, this place is disgusting.’ Three.

Each consonant sharp and focused, driven as his hands sliced through the air, as the rage pinched his cheeks, as the curse words fled off his tongue as though they had all been crammed into his mouth at once. A boy who craved touch and yet constantly denied it, afraid of the germs that could be transferred. A fanny pack stuffed with lies and fears, a sick mother projecting onto a child. A boy who found his family anyway, one that he built, one that built houses in his heart.

We choose our family.

‘Your face is disgusting.’ Two.

So natural a joke that the cogs hardly turned in his brain, a mouth on a motor, hands constantly twitching, reaching, grabbing, poking. Laughter both his best defence and greatest gift, with so much love in his heart to give that he hardly knew where to place it all, and yet constantly felt empty as he constructed walls around himself and

hollowed out his insides. A boy who never believed that he would be happy, that anyone could give him the love that he had to offer out. But he deserved better than that.

She deserved better too.

‘Eddie. Richie.’

‘I don’t know what to do.’ One.

A voice that settled over her like a blanket on a Sunday afternoon, like hot tea pooling in her stomach, like the sun as they bathed by the quarry as children. She thought of a boy with eyes that shined up at her like she had been brought down from the heavens, who never thought of her as lesser, who never listened to any words another had to say about her, only the words she had to say for herself, the words he wanted to tell her, the words of a poet.

She thought of a boy who built an underground hideout so that she and her friends would have a safe space. She thought of a boy who loved the music that he loved regardless of other people’s opinions. She thought of a boy who understood more deeply and completely the nuances and colours of the soul that shimmered inside her, who anticipated her when no one else could, who wanted both to protect her and to let her be free.

She remembered what he had said to her the day she left Derry, when he had come to that very building twenty-seven years ago to confess his love to her. If there was anything I could do that would make sure you ended up happy, then I would do it in a second.

Then she felt his lips on hers. Catapulted back to a moment as a child when he had done the same to bring her screaming back from the depths of the nothing, to bring her back to him.

‘Ben,’ she whispered and finally opened her eyes. The light flooded in and she blinked his face out of silhouette.

‘Bev?’ he tremored, his eyes flickering between hers.

She threw her arms around him. ‘Ben,’ she said again, certainly, gorgeously, as though it were a thousand syllables instead of only

one.

‘Are you alright?’ he asked.

Nodding, she said, ‘I am now.’ Letting herself look beyond the man before her, she surveyed the group crowded around her.

Bill, Stan, Mike, Eddie, Richie. Her friends.

‘You came to get me,’ she said gently.

Ben. Her love.

‘Of course we did,’ Ben said, smiling gently.

Bev. Herself.

‘Thank you,’ she said. Then she frowned, ‘Eddie, what the fuck happened to your face?’

Mike grinned, ‘I think we’re good to get out of here.’

---

They decided to go to the library to resettle themselves, talk and regroup. It ended up being the worst place for them to be, as Henry Bowers re-entered their lives like a frenetic tornado. As he pinned Mike to the floor, Richie didn’t hesitate to grab the hatchet and swing. The weapon buried into the skull with a sickening smack, cleaving a hole which oozed in scarlet. Richie vomited. So did Stan.

‘Fucking hell. Was that really necessary?’ Stan spluttered, wiping his hand on his mouth.

‘Jesus.’ Eddie grimaced at the corpse in front of him as Bill attended to a harrowed Mike. Ben ushered Bev away; she needed to sit down as it was.

Richie blinked. ‘I did say I would kill him. God, I hope the press

doesn't get wind of this.'

'Now there's a headline,' Eddie agreed half-heartedly, turning away from the scene, trying not to give in to how nauseous it was also making him feel. Knowing that both Stan and Eddie had hurled didn't help his stomach. Eventually, he gave in to the urge.

'Copycat,' Richie joked, coughing.

Mike gave Bill a key so that they could close the library doors and ensure themselves some sanctuary. As he locked up, Ben went to try and locate some cleaning supplies, but Richie, Eddie and Stan headed straight to the bathroom, thinking that they might need to be sick again.

When Ben didn't quickly return, Bill went to go and help him.

'Are you o-okay?' he asked once he found Ben propped up in the stairwell, not moving.

Ben looked at him. 'It's found me here before. I'm only just remembering.'

'So m-much comes b-back. You don't r-realise how m-much you can actually f-f-forget,' Bill barked, resting a hand on his shoulder.

'Like kissing her,' Ben whispered. 'I remembered that I kissed her when she was in the Deadlights, but until I kissed her just now I'd forgotten how it felt. So flat, and cold, like she wasn't really there, until her eyes opened and I'd broken away, then suddenly she was warm and intricate again.'

Bill watched as Ben removed a sheet of paper from his back pocket. It was blank, aside from the childish signature of a young Beverly Marsh, complete with three biro hearts.

Ben traced the letters with his thumb. 'It made me think of another time, on her last day, when she'd kissed me, just for the briefest moment, and I got to feel all that warmth and intricacy through me, and I'd never been more sure that I really knew how it felt to be in love.'

Bill leaned against the wall. ‘Those kinds of m-memories are a lot to t-take. Not where w-we were or w-what was said, but h-h-how you f-felt. It’s like living the emotions all o-over again.’

‘That’s exactly what it’s like,’ Ben agreed. ‘Guess that’s how Richie and Eddie just fell into each other.’

‘And you and B-Bev?’ Bill asked carefully.

He sighed, ‘I don’t know. I’m very conflicted. I love Fran. But so much is coming back to me about Bev that I never really got over or worked through, so now it feels like I’ve always loved her but that I love Fran too, and I don’t know how to be in love with two people.’

Bill knew there wouldn’t be a better opportunity. ‘I know exactly w-what you m-mean.’ He winced, ‘Not B-B-Bev, just to b-be clear.’ He’d said it automatically so that Ben didn’t feel threatened, but by accident he had revealed that he harboured affections for one of the other Losers and bit his tongue.

‘It’s Stan, isn’t it?’ Ben asked quietly, and when Bill met his gaze, he added, ‘I’ve seen the way you look at him. Not to mention you went to Atlanta. And,’ he smiled, ‘I saw you holding hands at breakfast.’

‘There’s the c-clincher,’ Bill grumbled. ‘I don’t know w-what to do. It’s all very o-overwhelming.’

Ben nodded. With a sigh, he said, ‘Let’s find the things we need to clean up.’ And they did.

---

In the bathroom, the three men had each adopted a different cubicle. Eddie was stood, bent at the waist, refusing to touch the walls, the floor, the porcelain seat. Richie was huddled over his basin, remembering the position he’d found himself in most mornings for the past year, recovering from a wicked hangover. Stan was sat in his doorway, hands on his knees, wondering if he would ever be able to

enter a bathroom again without wincing.

‘You know what happens when we leave this building,’ Stan said solemnly.

‘We face It,’ Richie whispered. ‘Fuck. I feel like I’m running out of time.’

Eddie stood up straight and turned around so that he could see his face in the mirrors above the sinks. ‘I feel like it’s about fucking time.’

‘How can you do it, Eddie?’ Stan asked, shaking his head. ‘Knowing what might happen, if things go the same way.’

In the reflection, Eddie watched as Richie winced and curled in on himself. ‘I don’t know who else might need me down there,’ he said, then sighed. ‘I feel like, in a weird way, that house is where I’m supposed to be today.’

Stan’s stomach coiled. ‘How are you not scared?’

‘I’m fucking terrified,’ Eddie admitted, fumbling for his inhaler in his jacket pocket. He stared at its familiar blue angles. ‘Sometimes you just need to believe that something’s going to work.’

‘Gazebo,’ Stan exhaled softly.

Eddie bit his lip. ‘Exactly. I’m taking this piece of shit placebo inhaler down there, because I used to believe that this thing could literally stop me from dying. If I stopped breathing, then it was okay, because I had this. And the crazy thing is, a whole life of not really needing this has made me need it now.’

‘That’s fucked up,’ Richie said, hauling himself to his feet.

‘It is,’ Eddie agreed. ‘But it’s given me some peace, strangely. All the shit I’ve been through hasn’t been for nothing; not just It, but all the crap with my mom and my dad and Eric and everyone else who ever fucking hurt me.’

Richie came up behind him and put his arms around his waist, resting his chin on his shoulder, looking at their reflections,

unsmiling.

‘And I do know what’s real now,’ Eddie said. ‘The cruel irony is, it’s whatever I want, whatever I believe, whatever I choose. So I just have to make sure that I choose wisely.’

Stan thought about what he’d said to Bill the previous night. How he’d lost himself trying to separate the realities from the fiction.

‘Do you remember what you promised me, Rich, that first day we kissed?’ Eddie asked.

‘No,’ Richie said honestly.

Eddie locked eyes with Richie’s reflection. ‘You promised me that you wouldn’t lie to me.’

‘About the important stuff,’ Richie added, remembering.

Nodding, Eddie shifted so that he could face Richie. ‘Yeah. Which is why it was so easy to choose you, choose this, us, over everything else I’ve had in between. You were the best choice I ever made and I know you still will be, every day from now.’

Richie kissed him.

‘And I choose to believe that all us Losers are going to defeat It, because I know we can, and I choose to believe that everyone is going to do their fucking best to change the future that we’ve seen, because,’ he looked at Stan, ‘we know we can.’

Stan stood and went to them, nodding his agreement.

Eddie looked one last time at the inhaler in his hand. ‘And so I choose to believe that I’m going to come out of that house alive.’

Clamping a hand on his shoulder, Stan said, ‘You can.’

### **Notes for the Chapter:**

Last one before Neibolt house !!

## 19. The Well

### Summary for the Chapter:

The Losers arrive at the Neibolt house.  
Their first goal: get to the well.

### Notes for the Chapter:

Apologies for the hiatus - I've not been well! Thank you for the support <3 Enjoy this chapter x

The Neibolt house loomed large and black.

'It's bigger than I remember,' Ben said.

'That's what Eddie's mom always said,' Richie murmured, and Eddie hit him.

'What's the plan again?' Stan gulped.

Mike rattled, like clockwork. 'Get inside. Get to the well. We go down into the lair. We do the ritual. We kill It. We leave.'

'You make it sound so easy, Mikey,' Bev said, leaning to the ground and picking up the fragment of fence which she had speared through It as a child.

'Are we g-gonna d-do this?' Bill asked.

Eddie looked at Richie, remembering what he had said all those years ago. 'Let's kill this fucking clown,' he said, and started to march towards the house. The other Losers watched him for a second, then hastily started to follow.

They crossed the porch to the threshold and Eddie reached out for the handle slowly, almost as though the iron could scald through his skin. He twisted the knob, and they pushed inside. It was quiet, eerily quiet, and the door creaked lethargically behind them before closing with a thud.

Eddie reached for Richie's hand and squeezed it. Richie reached for Bev's, Bev for Ben's. With his other hand, Eddie reached for Stan, Stan reached for Bill, and Bill reached for Mike. A chain of solidarity, their alliance, their club. The Losers club. They hoped they wouldn't lose today. They couldn't lose today.

'Which way is the well?' Ben whispered as they all let each other go. 'I can't remember.' Out of the corner of his eye, he could swear he saw movement in the neighbouring room.

'This house was always a bit of a maze,' Stan said, his voice low, peering through a different doorway. 'Almost like it moves itself around.'

'It should be this way,' Mike said, striding forwards confidently. Eddie and Bill were hot on his heels.

Conscious that they should be staying together, Richie shot glances at the other members of his team and saw Ben absentmindedly cross a different threshold. He lunged for him, grabbing his thick arm. 'Stick with the group, asshole. You know It likes to –'

The door slammed shut behind them.

'Separate us,' Richie finished, his voice barely above a whisper. 'Fucking hell.' He leapt to the door, wrenching at the handle, pounding at the wood as he hollered out for the other Losers, hollered out for Eddie.

'Beep-beep, Richie,' Pennywise laughed.

As the door had slammed, Bev jumped, grabbing the attention of Stan who too had hung back. 'Ben! Richie!' she yelled, hammering on the door, twisting the handle fruitlessly.

Memories triggered violently and unforgivingly for Stan; the closed bathroom door, of Patty and Bill trying to break their way in. Uncontrollably, he started to hyperventilate, stepping backwards, tripping onto the floor.

He heard a crackling noise behind him, a scuttling, and the hairs on the back of his neck prickled. As a frantic Beverly gave up on the

unopened door, she spotted what was manifesting behind his head.

‘Don’t look,’ she hissed, and his eyes widened.

The creature lunged, gripping Stan’s shoulders and starting to drag him backwards.

‘Stan!’ Beverly screamed, pelting after him into another room. The door slammed behind her.

Bill, Eddie and Mike turned on their heels at the commotion and darted backwards. They tried both doors, to no avail. A chorus of swear words sprang from their lips. Nervous sweat sheened on their foreheads.

A familiar, haunting cackle filtered through the air as they tried to run, tried to make it through the house to the well.

‘Wanna play a game?’ a childlike voice giggled. ‘How about two truths and one lie?’

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A cold breeze wafted through the room. Leaflets and flyers caught on Richie’s shoes. A haze of fog lilted around their knees. Through the mist, Richie and Ben saw what lined each wall of the room: Headstones.

‘What are these?’ Ben asked.

‘Not again,’ Richie groaned, his heart pounding as he looked at his own face plastered on a missing poster. ‘I’m not afraid of that anymore!’ he screamed into the ether.

Pennywise unfurled itself from a corner of the ceiling. ‘You should be, Richie. What is it you said, Fatboy? A lot more has changed.’

Ben stared down at the papers he had clutched into his hands.

‘Richie?’ he said quietly.

‘I don’t want to look,’ Richie screeched. ‘I don’t want to know.’

In Ben’s trembling hands, he saw the image of the collapsed Neibolt house, and below it, the names of each of the seven Losers: missing, presumed dead.

‘Looks like you won’t be coming out, Richie,’ Pennywise leered. ‘But then, isn’t that what you always wanted?’

‘Don’t let It get to you, Richie,’ Ben warned. ‘You know it’s not real.’

They snatched glances at the headstones around the room, inscribed. *Benjamin Hanscom: Not A Loving Husband. Richard Tozier: Gone And Forgotten.*

Pennywise’s head snapped to Ben, rotating unnaturally too far, like a mechanical toy. ‘Don’t you want it to be real, Handsome?’

*Michael Hanlon: Lies Here. William Denbrough: With His Brother In Death. Stanley Uris: He Shall Not Rest.*

‘No!’ Ben squealed, crumpling the papers in his hand.

*Edward Kaspbrak: Died Of A Short Illness. Beverly Marsh: Home.*

‘I think it’s romantic,’ Pennywise growled, coming closer. ‘You and Beverly lying side by side in your graves, for all eternity.’ He laughed, stroking a long finger along the breadth of Ben’s stomach. ‘Might need two graves for you.’

Richie lunged for one of the smaller headstones. ‘The only grave this house will be is yours!’ he shouted and swung the stone slab at Pennywise’s wide grin. The face distorted like plaster, the mouth slipping around, the eye sinking.

‘Ben, run!’ Richie cried, and the pair started to pelt to the other end of the room.

‘Run, run, run,’ Pennywise cackled. ‘Never could bring yourself to run, Ben, could you?’

Ben barrelled at the unopened door, and it burst open.

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Beverly ran after Stan with her spear held aloft, but the spider-like creature was moving so quickly that she couldn't get a clean shot without the risk of impaling Stan. It dragged him rapidly, through the one room until it reached a second door, which opened of its own accord.

'Oh, fuck,' Bev mumbled as the room revealed itself before her. It was a bathroom, Stanley and Patricia Uris's bathroom, only the walls and floor were slick with red blood, just like Beverly's had been as a child. The blood her father couldn't see.

The creature dragged Stan up over the lip of the porcelain and crashed him into the water, then started holding him down.

'Stay under!' Beverly warned him ceaselessly as he gasped for breaths, then held the spear aloft and javelined it into the creature's body. It flew backwards with the force of it, pierced through its centre, pinned against the wall where it writhed and screamed.

Stan wrenched his head back above the water, struggling. He felt a searing pain along his arms and looked down to see the slits. A long line on his left forearm, a second long line on his right forearm crossed at the bracelet of fortune. IT.

In his right hand was a razor blade, sticky with syrup. The water around him morphed from clear to a deep red as he lay there, as the blood began to cascade from the cuts on his arms, like waterfalls, like sheets of red hair.

'No, no, I fixed it,' he said quietly. 'We stopped it.'

Beverly jumped for him, her arms outstretched, but even as she did so, she was caught by a thick rope of hair around her wrist, around her ankle. It tightened, chafing, burning. She turned to see it

emanating from the plughole of the sink. With her free hand, she tried to tug at the restraints.

‘Come on, Beverly,’ a voice chuckled darkly. She recognised it; the voice of a man who had struck her around the face. ‘Every woman secretly fantasises about being tied up. Being bound. Losing control.’

Her face cold, she gave in to its pull. As she was hauled backwards, the rope grew slack enough for her to yank free. ‘Not me!’ she insisted, running for the other side of the bath and wrenching her spear out of the wall. The creature huffed and whined; with her boot she slammed down on its head once, twice, three times, until it stopped moving.

She draped her arms around Stan’s shoulders and heaved, laying his weight against her to get him out of the bath. As his feet left the water, he inhaled raggedly, the visions on his body disappearing. He slapped at the smooth, unblemished skin on his forearms as though he were dreaming.

‘Am I dead?’ he asked.

‘No,’ Bev assured. ‘You’re okay, Stan. You’re okay.’

Stan huddled into her, his wet hair sticking to his forehead and the nape of his neck. ‘I’m so scared, Bevv. Are you okay?’ he asked quickly.

She nodded, watching as the spider-like creature dissolved into an ooze and melted into the floor. ‘Yeah, I’m okay. We need to keep moving.’

‘Get to the well,’ Stan nodded, as they supported each other to their feet.

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Mike, Bill and Eddie hovered at the lip of the well, waiting for the

rest of their crew to arrive, standing back to back in the hopes that It couldn't creep up on them.

'Eddie, Eddie,' a voice called, echoing up the stone walls of the chamber. It sounded like Sonia Kaspbrak's plaintive cry, like Eddie had heard earlier when he faced off against the leper at the pharmacy. Then it morphed, distorting, growing deeper but no less familiar. 'Eddie, Eddie.' Eric's voice. It slid up and down in register, like an old record player, switching between the two voices.

'Fuck you!' Eddie cried. His voice carried down, ricocheting, haunted.

'Everybody lies to Eddie Kaspbrak, don't they?' It leered from the depths, and something began slithering up the walls. 'His mommy. His husband. Even his oldest, dearest friends. So many secrets. So many lies.'

'Don't listen to him, Eddie,' Mike said, his heart pounding as a worming entity rose up over the lip, like a swarm of leeches. 'Ignore It.'

It laughed, 'That's your solution for everything, Mikey, isn't it? Ignore it, ignore it, just wait for it to go away.'

Mike swallowed, 'I'm not waiting for you to go away.'

'Ah, but you've *been* waiting, haven't you?' Its voice was mischievous, teasing, as the tentacles inched across the floor, forcing them to split apart from each other, into different corners of the room. 'Since she went away.'

'What's It o-on about, M-Mikey?' Bill asked, peeling onto the tips of his toes.

It whined, as the floor writhed. 'Oh, Billy, haven't years of writing p-p-p-proved that in the end, everyone and everything is p-p-p-predictable? Or did you not s-s-s-s-see this all coming?'

'S-s-stop th-that!' Bill yelled, hating It's imitation of his stutter.

'There won't be a happy ending,' It sobbed. 'Your story ends down here, next to your brother and your lover.'

Eddie reeled, 'Lover?'

Loser. Lover. Loser. Lover.

Richie and Ben burst through the door, dishevelled, and the slithering mass retracted as quickly as it had come.

'Eddie,' Richie whispered, and threw his arms around him. A rogue flyer was still stuck to the sole of his shoe. 'Thank fuck, you're okay. Bill? Mike? Are you okay?'

'Just about,' Mike managed, tentatively testing the floorboards.

'But where are Bev and Stan?' Ben asked, protectively cradling his stomach where it had traced its finger, branding.

Another door crashed open. Wet, shaking, bloodstained, Bev and Stan lumbered into the room, propping each other up. In one hand, Bev still clutched the spear.

'My G-God,' Bill leapt over to them, taking one of their cold hands each. 'What h-h-happened?'

Stan stumbled over his words almost as much as Bill. 'B-b-bathroom. B-b-bathtub. B-b-blood.'

Bev sighed, 'It's not holding back.'

Richie peeled the flyer off his shoe and tossed it away without looking at it. Eddie glanced over, and immediately wished he hadn't. An obituary. *In Memoriam: Richard Tozier*. His heart clenched.

'We can't hold back either,' Richie said.

The group looked around at each other and silently agreed. Without a word, they took position around the hole, seven points to the star, staring down into the abyss.

'What are we waiting for?' Mike said resolutely and started to make his descent.

Bev went next, and Ben after her.

As Eddie poised, hoisting his knee onto the stone, Richie grabbed him. 'Wait,' he said, pulling him around. He looked at him, then kissed him deeply. He knew that Eddie had to do this, wanted to do this, and he wasn't going to try and stop him. Still, he needed to say, 'I love you,' even through his trembling fear. He placed his hand on Eddie's cheek and he flinched.

'Ow,' Eddie grumbled.

'Sorry.'

'I love you too,' he said, and disappeared into the dark. Richie held his breath and followed.

Bill looked at Stan, still wet, clothes clinging against his body. Stan looked back at him.

'I'm going to be alright, Billy,' Stan promised, just as he had done all those years ago.

With stark clarity, Bill remembered the response he had given before: *I know. Maybe I just worry that I won't be.* It had been that day that Bill had said goodbye to Stan, and not seen him again for over twenty years. He'd left without saying what he needed to say, without doing what he ached to do.

Bill couldn't bear to repeat himself. He pressed their lips together. He'd only intended for it to last a moment, but it ran away from him, transporting them to another place, another time, even as his hands grew damp clutching at Stan's shirt, even as the gloom shrouded around them.

'I love you, Stan,' Bill whispered somewhere between breaths, unsure whether their lips were even apart.

Stan flicked his eyes open, surveying the face before him until Bill looked at him. 'You didn't stutter,' he said quietly.

'No,' Bill said quietly.

Stan kissed him again. 'I love you too.'

Bill leant his forehead against Stan's. 'This is not a f-fucking ending,' he vowed.

'That's what I always tried to tell you,' Stan smirked.

They exhaled heavily, turned towards the well, and climbed down.

**Notes for the Chapter:**

Eep they're going down!